

A CHOICE FOR WHOLE LOVE:  
SINGLE AND CELIBATE IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

A Professional Project  
presented to  
the Faculty of the  
Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Krista Suzanne Givens  
Advisor: Dr. Ellen Ott Marshall

May 2007

## **ABSTRACT**

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By examining the historical and philosophical foundation upon which the current policy was built, this project proposes a new celibacy for single United Methodist clergy. The project examines the history of clerical celibacy from Early Methodism to the 1984 General Conference. Two extremes will be explored: perspectives from the Roman Catholic Church and from Feminism/Paganism. A new post-dualistic, post-hierarchical, self-affirming theology of celibacy will be proposed. An educational model for a retreat with clergy candidates follows, concluding with suggestions for further work.

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Krista Suzanne Givens

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

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By examining the historical and philosophical foundation upon which the current policy was built, this project proposes a new understanding of celibacy for single clergy in the United Methodist Church.

The project begins with a study of celibacy in the California-Pacific Annual Conference. Using a survey to gather information, the conclusions reflect the relaxed working definition of celibacy for the clergy sampled and the need for support, preparation and discussion around the issues of clerical sexuality. The project then examines the history of clerical celibacy in the Early Methodist movement and the developments that led to the current policy. Two extreme models will then be explored: the model from the Roman Catholic Church and the model from Feminism and Paganism. A new model of celibacy will then be proposed, one that is Post-Dualistic, Post-Hierarchical and Self-Affirming. An educational model for a retreat with ministerial candidates will be detailed to aid in preparation for celibate life and suggestions for further work will be presented.

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The project is dedicated to my parents  
Terry and Carolyne Givens  
who have supported and loved me  
unconditionally

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### CONFESIONS OF A CELIBATE

I am single and celibate. This may be a strange proclamation to hear echoing through the halls of a sanctuary, through the corridors of a seminary, or against the walls of a church office somewhere. But if one is an unmarried United Methodist pastor or a candidate for ministry in the United Methodist Church, then this is to be our accompanying motto: “I am single and celibate!” Unfortunately, not every single and celibate pastor celebrates in such a way. Some feel forced into a lifestyle they find oppressive, governed by a hierachal institution that is out of touch with the postmodern world and with contemporary cultural mores. With little preparation, single clergy take a vow they often don’t understand, often abhor, and often don’t actually intend to keep. It becomes just another “hoop” through which to jump in the circus of becoming ordained. Furthermore, without an opportunity for discussion, preparation or support, clergy are expected to lead a celibate life but are left to their own devices to discover how to live such a life with integrity.

As a single clergywoman, I first faced the reality and gravity of the vow of celibacy in the context of preparing answers for an ordination exam paper. I began to ask questions. “What is celibacy? What definition are we using? What behavior is excluded or included? How does one live a celibate life? There must be some instructional materials provided if I am going to be required to live this life,” I thought. I was wrong. The Church is virtually silent on issues of clerical sexuality.<sup>1</sup> As I entered the ordination process I inquired with mentors about the celibacy mandate. One explained the

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<sup>1</sup> I refer here to the United Methodist Church, its hierarchy and its decision-making body, the General Conference. The Church is virtually silent on matters regarding clerical sexuality, except in the case of clerical sexual abuse. Due to recent changes in insurance policies, there are now strict procedures to follow to prevent sexual abuse by clergy, especially regarding children.

circumstances surrounding the insertion of the phrase into the Book of Discipline as an effort to ban homosexual clergy from ordination and appointment. Wanting to brush a conversation about sex under the rug, another mentor told me, “I’ll let you work that out on your own.” Unfortunately, we do: single clergy in the United Methodist Church are left to work out celibacy on our own. For some that means developing a definition of celibacy that can be flexible or accommodating to one’s sexual behaviors. (One woman I spoke with defined celibacy as “just don’t get pregnant.”) For others it may mean a strict definition of celibacy that is so unattainable, one may publicly declare celibacy but then choose not to live as a celibate. For me, the journey toward celibacy began with a lot of reading - most by male, Catholic authors - but being a Protestant and a woman I felt separated from the intended audience. I had to translate many of the ideas into my own language to discover what was applicable to my context. This project is, among other things, an attempt to translate the literature on celibacy into a Protestant, particularly Methodist, language applicable to both women and men, people of all sexual self-identifications, whether single or married.

We begin with a definition. Catholic author A.W. Richard Sipe defines celibacy as “a freely chosen dynamic state, usually vowed, that involves an honest and sustained attempt to live without direct sexual gratification in order to serve others productively for a spiritual motive.”<sup>2</sup> In this definition, Sipe moves away from the dualistically based definition of celibacy that depends on the renunciation of the body toward a definition that proposes a voluntary decision to “live without” for the sake of the community. Sipe’s 2004 book, Living the Celibate Life: A Search for Models and Meaning provides various models of celibacy, which unfortunately are all male and mostly saints. However

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<sup>2</sup> A.W. Richard Sipe, Celibacy: A Way of Loving, Living and Serving (Ligouri, MO: Triumph Books, 1996), 40.

unapproachable the models may be, they do provide us examples of celibacy lived in the real world. Although Sipe's work is essential in the study of clerical celibacy, he is a Roman Catholic and speaks to those who are looking to enter Catholic religious life. In Catholicism, to be called to the ministry is to be called to celibacy. My work is from a Protestant perspective where the call to ministry is regarded as distinct from one's sexual life and thus dissonance may exist between one's vocation and one's sexuality. Additionally, because the priesthood in the Catholic Church is reserved for men, women are often viewed as a temptation to the success of the celibate priest. In contrast, Protestant clergy – both men and women - face a variety of issues not experienced by a male-only priesthood. For example, as male and female clergy work together, we must navigate the risky waters of our sexualities in our discussions, in our power relationships and in our attempt to care for one another.

Another author who has greatly informed this project is ethicist James B. Nelson and his considerable work in Embodiment Theology. In his 1992 book Body Theology he explained,

Sexuality is far more than what we do with our genitals. It is our way of being in the world as bodyselves who are gendered biologically and socially, who have varying sexual orientations, who have the capacity for sensuousness, who have the need for intimacy, who have varied and often conflicting feelings about what it means to be bodied.<sup>3</sup>

Using Nelson's explanation of sexuality, I assert that celibacy can be accepted as another form of sexual expression, far from the genital expression of sex, but a choice nonetheless made as we experience this life as a gendered, fleshly, embodied sexual being. Celibacy – this freely chosen, dynamic state of “living without” to benefit the

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<sup>3</sup> James B. Nelson, Body Theology (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 45.

community – is another way to express one’s sexuality. It is a way to live as a sexual being in this world.

As we begin this journey together, we must start from the same point. Sipe’s definition with some clarification by Nelson is the ideal to which we strive. If only all those who find themselves celibate in the United Methodist Church today *freely chose* their celibacy! If only those who are supposed to be celibate were making *an honest and sustained attempt* to live as celibates! If only we all were in it for the same reasons, for *the benefit of others!*

This project addresses the various justifications for clerical celibacy in the United Methodist Church, while confronting some of the opposition to such a policy. The current policy for ordained ministry, stated in the United Methodist Book of Discipline, calls for “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness,” and although an important issue, this project will not address the part of the United Methodist policy that requires “fidelity in marriage,” but only the requirement for “celibacy in singleness.” The project does address celibacy for the clergy, but also presents a theology of celibacy applicable to laity. The observations gathered through conversation and surveys are limited to United Methodist clergy in the California-Pacific Annual Conference. It is expected that their opinions will reflect those of United Methodist clergy in other conferences. In addition, the project does not address the failures of clergy in maintaining celibacy, but tries to uplift celibacy as a practical expression of one’s sexuality, if adequate preparation, education and support are provided.

In this project I will bring together the historical and theological justifications for celibacy and the practice of celibacy as lived by current clergy. In this connection (or disconnection), I will highlight the difficulties in living out a vow of celibacy as

mandated by a hierarchical institution. I will begin this chapter with the problem – how is celibacy lived today in the clergy of the Cal-Pac Annual Conference of the UMC?

In Chapter 2, I will explore the historical foundation from which we derive. The first part of Chapter Two will survey the historical events in Early Methodist history, including the Reformation’s challenge to Article 32 of the Church of England’s *Articles of Religion*, John Wesley’s experience with clerical marriage, Francis Asbury’s experience of clerical celibacy and the original policies of the Wesleyan Movement regarding clerical marriage. The second half of Chapter Two will examine the historical events in the United Methodist Church that led to Paragraph 404.4e in 1984 the Book of Discipline, which states clergy must adhere to “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.”

In Chapter 3, I will examine the extremes. One opinion claims celibacy as a standard to which all clergy are called. The other extreme denies celibacy’s place in the matrix of sexual expression, thereby devaluing the practice. I will first examine the model that embraces celibacy for all clergy: The Roman Catholic Model. By examining the model from Roman Catholicism in a new light, we may recognize some methods we can adapt to suit our own needs. For example, if we embrace clerical celibacy, even for select clergy, is it possible to draw on the model used in Catholic seminaries for the preparation of priests? The second model seemingly denies the value of celibacy: The Model from Feminism and Paganism. Because the practice of clerical celibacy developed from a dualistic understanding of the relationship between the soul and the body, this view declares little if any value in celibacy because our philosophical understanding of the body and soul relationship has changed. In this model we ask, should the practice of celibacy be mandated when the philosophical climate has evolved so dramatically?

In Chapter 4, I will propose a new ethical and theological framework that will illuminate the positive gifts that can come from celibacy. This chapter shows how celibacy can be reclaimed as a valid practice – as an expression of one’s sexuality – and should be a choice that is voluntarily made by the individual her/himself. It will propose a new definition of celibacy that is post-dualistic, post-hierarchical and self-affirming.

Chapter 5 will address the question: How shall we prepare candidates for the challenges they will face regarding their sexual identity, especially if celibacy is required. What preparations need to be made? What discussions need to happen and how do we facilitate that dialogue? What systems need to be in place to provide support to celibate clergy? This chapter will propose an educational model for a retreat with candidates for ministry, and includes questions for reflection, a list of resources and contact information for support in the pursuit of healthy celibacy. After establishing the need for solutions, Chapter 6 will offer some conclusions.

### **WE JUST WINK AT THAT PART: CELIBACY IN THE CALIFORNIA-PACIFIC ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

During the 1984 General Conference the United Methodist Church representatives inserted seven words into Paragraph 404.4e of the Book of Discipline requiring candidates for ministry to adhere to “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.”<sup>4</sup> As a single clergywoman who has voluntarily chosen celibacy, but has heard angry rumblings for years, I decided to survey my colleagues in the California-Pacific Annual Conference to discover how celibacy is (or is not) being practiced in our conference. At the clergy session of the 2006 Annual Conference, 670 surveys were

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<sup>4</sup> The mandate for “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” has remained in the Book of Discipline since 1984, but its location has changed. In the 1996 Book of Discipline the mandate, previously in Paragraph 404.4e appeared in Paragraph 304.2, where it remains to this day.

distributed to all clergy present, both active and retired.<sup>5</sup> The surveys contained general information-gathering questions about the subjects: age, gender, marital and ordination status and sexual self-identification. Questions to discern a working definition of celibacy followed. I also asked participants to explain their experience with celibacy and if they'd engaged in any preparation, discussion or support for celibacy during candidacy and/or ministry.

At the end of the week, I collected 89 surveys: 13% of the total number of clergy to which the survey was given. The data collected provides a glimpse into the lives of our clergy, those dealing with the celibacy mandate and those outside the requirement.

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Clergy Sample**

Gender	Marital Status	Age Range		Ordination Status		Self-Identification	
Male	44%	Married	79%	Boomer	64%	Ordained	75%
Female	35%	Single	9%	Gen X	21%	Probationary	12%
*Null	<u>21%</u>	Divorced	7%	Silent	<u>15%</u>	Candidate	3%
	100%	Widowed	2%		100%	Local Pastor	<u>10%</u>
		Partnered	2%				100%
		Divorced/ Remarried	<u>1%</u>				100%
			100%				

Who are these 89 clergy subjects? Table 1 shows that the majority are ordained, heterosexual, married Baby Boomers.<sup>6</sup> Twenty percent of the sample would be classified as single (those who are single, divorced, widowed and partnered) and obligated to the restrictions of the mandate. The gender ratio was equitable, 44% answering "Male" and 35% answering "Female." Twenty-one percent did not provide a gender identification.<sup>7</sup> Why? Perhaps it was placement of the item on the survey itself. Perhaps subjects were unable to see the question amid the surrounding questions, or perhaps it was intentional

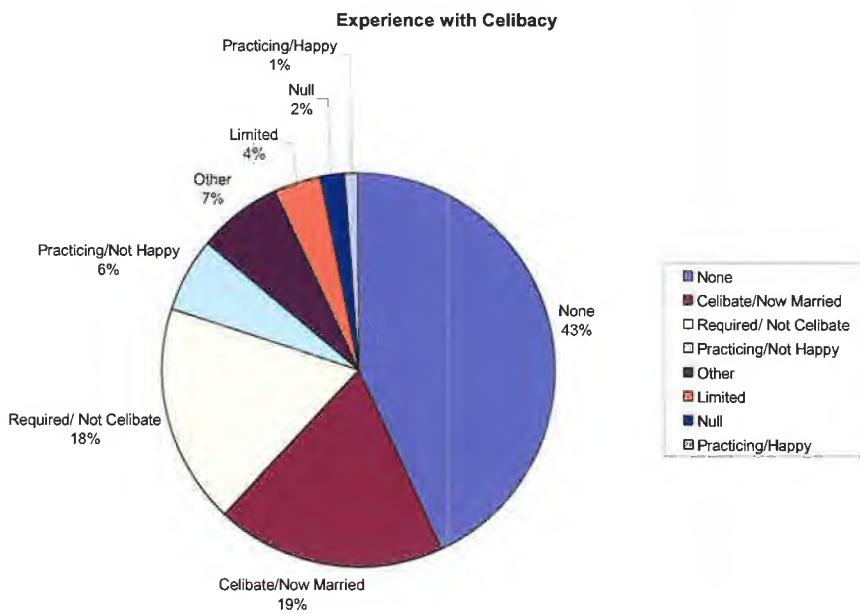
<sup>5</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>6</sup> Silent Generation – born between 1925-1942; Boomers – born between 1943-1960; Generation X – born between 1961-1981.

<sup>7</sup> Those who did not provide an answer to a question are referred to by the term "Null."

so as to prevent the information-gatherer from identifying the subject. In addition, Table 1 demonstrates the prevalence of the ordained clergy represented by the survey: 75% of the subjects were Ordained, 12% were in probationary status, 3% were candidates for ministry and 10% identified themselves as local pastors. The majority (64%) of the subjects were born between 1943-1960, generationally identified as Baby Boomers. Those called Generation X (born between 1961 and 1981) were represented by 21% of the sample and those born between 1925 and 1942, called the Silent Generation, were represented by 15% of the clergy sample. Eighty-eight percent of the sample identified themselves as heterosexual, 8% identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual and 4% of the sample chose not to answer the question.

**Table 2: Experience with Celibacy of Our Clergy Sample**



Of the 89 subjects, Table 2 shows that 43% reported no direct experience with the requirement. Either they were married through candidacy and during ministry, or they were single before the 1984 General Conference, and therefore not bound by the restriction.

Table 2 also shows that 24% of the subjects were obviously unhappy with the requirement: both the 18% who are required to be celibate and are not and the 6% who are practicing celibates, but would like not to be. Only 1% of the subjects admitted to be happy practicing celibacy.

Table 2 indicates that when asked about their experience with celibacy, 7% answered “other.” The following comments explain some of their answers:

“As an adult in a long term dating relationship, I have had some physical contact. Marriage has been considered but because of children and geographical distance is not possible. I seek always to be responsible and pure in heart.”

- Divorced, Ordained, Boomer, heterosexual female (#8)

“I was not celibate when single, but the paragraph went into effect after I was ordained.”

- Married, Ordained, Boomer, heterosexual female (#30)

“Non-celibate during engagement.”

- Married, Ordained, Silent, heterosexual male (#40)

“I started candidacy unfaithful to celibacy then convicted by the Holy Spirit realized then I needed to be celibate as a single man... It is essential for our society to be true to this call as clergy.”

- Married, Ordained, Boomer, heterosexual male (#42)

“It was required of me and I abided by that standard according to my standards indicated above.” [Only “No Intercourse” marked.]

- Married, Ordained, Gen X, heterosexual male (#51)

“Between marriages I was not celibate.”

- Married, Ordained, Boomer, heterosexual male (#71)

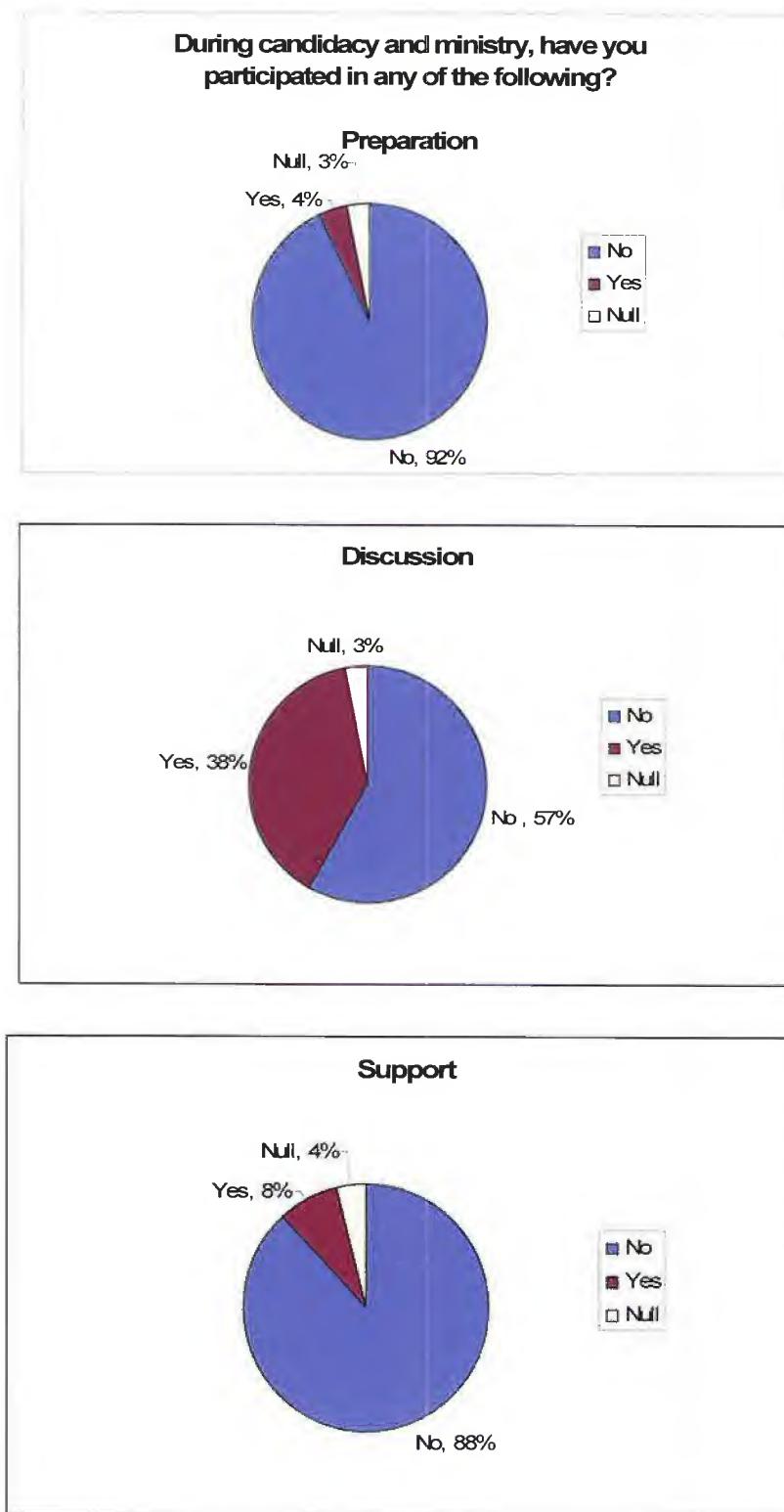
**Table 3: Assessment of Preparation, Discussion and Support of Celibacy**

Table 3 shows responses of subjects regarding overall preparation for celibate life.

Of the responders, 92% indicated that no preparation was given to lay a foundation for

healthy celibacy, 57% of the responders indicated no discussion before the ordination vow or during ministry, 88% of the responders indicated that no support has been given via counseling, spiritual direction or by a District Superintendent or Bishop. With respect to discussion of celibacy, 38% of the responders said they had discussed celibacy during candidacy and/or ministry. Following are some comments by responders who answered "Yes."

"I have discussed the issue candidly with ordained people of every level and believe most subscribe to 'don't ask don't tell.'"

- Single, Ordained, Gen X, homosexual male (#1)

"...with friends. Nothing from supervisory levels."

- Married, Ordained, Gen X, heterosexual female (#22)

"This was a question on my ordination papers, and I was honest about my stand on this, which I view as counter to Christian sexuality... and a thinly veiled attempt to deny sexual activity by homosexuals."

- Widowed, Ordained, Boomer, heterosexual female (#25)

"No one I knew thought it was a good idea."

- Divorced/Married, Ordained, Boomer bisexual male (#27)

"My male mentor (I am female) told me 'We just wink at that part.'"

- Married, Ordained, Boomer heterosexual female (#74)

**Table 4: Working Definition of Celibacy According to Clergy Sample**

Which of the following is included in your understanding of celibacy?

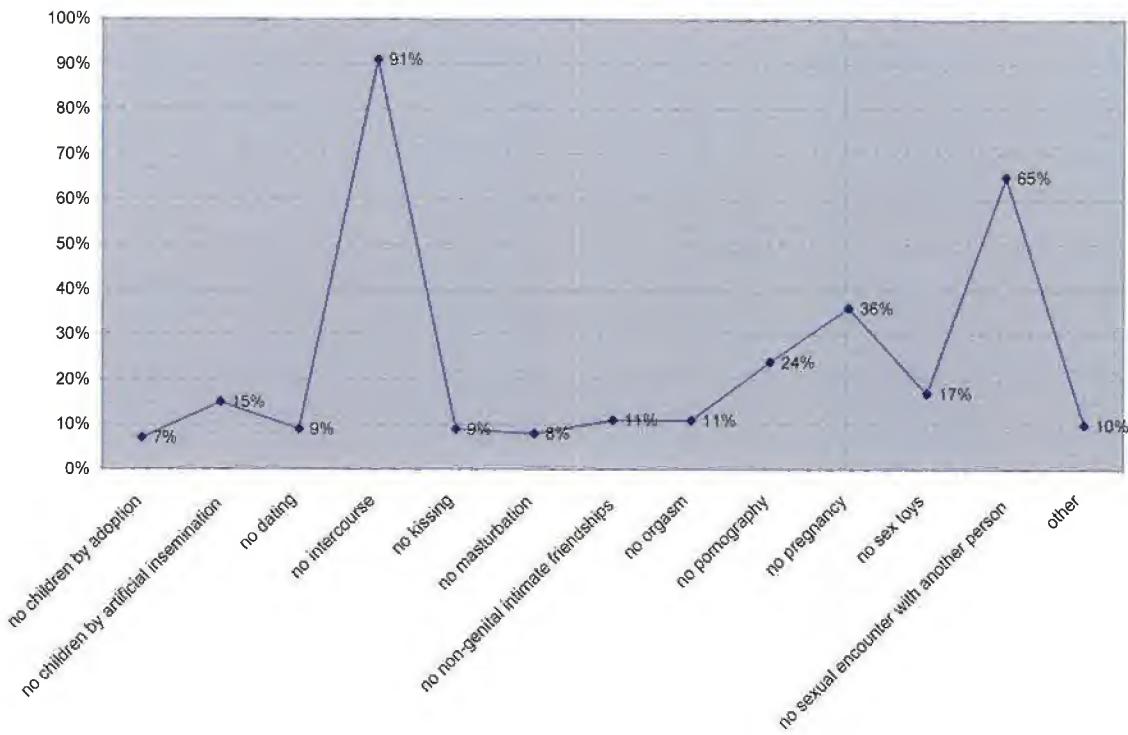


Table 4 shows responses of clergy subjects regarding a working definition of celibacy. An overwhelming 91% checked “no intercourse” and 65% indicated “no sexual encounter with another person.” Upon peer review of the data, there has been some discussion of the vagueness inherent in the phrasing of “no sexual encounter:” What is a sexual encounter? Is holding hands, hugging, kissing a sexual encounter? Of the 9% that did not check “no intercourse,” 8% marked one answer: “no sexual encounter with another person” and 1% marked only one answer: “no pregnancy.” Thirty-six percent of respondents indicated that “no pregnancy” was included in their definition of celibacy. I was interested in the gender make-up of the 36%, thinking pregnancy would mean something different to men and women. Of the 36%, 15 respondents were male and eight

were female. However nine subjects did not indicate a gender, so that investigation was inconclusive.

Why does the United Methodist Church require single clergy to be celibate and how do we, as clergy, understand the requirement? Perhaps we understand the requirement to insist on celibacy to provide a group of clergy that is able to move freely in the itinerant system. With no immediate family, single clergy may proclaim, as Francis Asbury wrote in his journal, “I have no possessions or babes to bind me to the soil.”<sup>8</sup> But the requirement does not extend to immediate family, namely the acquisition of children. Only 7% included “no children by adoption” in their definition of celibacy and 15% of respondents included “no children by artificial insemination” in their definition. As I have previously mentioned, 36% indicated that pregnancy was a violation of the requirement. I can speculate about the 15 men that indicated pregnancy would be a violation as their personal reaction to “getting someone pregnant.” Of the eight women who excluded pregnancy from their definition, two answered both “no pregnancy” and “no children by artificial insemination,” indicating that it would be a violation to carry a child oneself *and* to have a surrogate mother carry a child. Six of the eight women who answered “no pregnancy” did not answer “no children by artificial insemination,” leaving me to speculate that, to those six respondents, carrying a child oneself would violate the requirement, but utilizing a surrogate mother might not.

We are celibate because The Book of Discipline requires it, but no reason is given as to why. According to our sample, 91% include “no intercourse” in their definition of celibacy concluding that *sex* is the problem. But sex is not banned altogether for all clergy, only for those outside the marital bond. Therefore the understanding by the

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<sup>8</sup> Francis Asbury, The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, ed. Elmer Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton, vol. 2 (London: Epworth Press, 1958), 609.

sample is one of morality: it is immoral for single clergy to have sex. The morality issue seems to have presented itself in other figures as well. Interestingly, 24% indicated that pornography was a violation of celibacy and 17% marked “no sex toys.” However, only 8% marked “no masturbation” (the second lowest answer, second only to adoption.) Therefore *possession* of pornography and sex toys, and not necessarily the activities they may promote, was incompatible with celibacy in our sample.

Finally, celibacy as a *calling* was rarely discussed. Even for the sake of appearances, the integrity of celibacy as a personal choice has been ignored. One respondent indicated that he has

“...been given direct advice from supervisor, ‘you should get married.’”

- Single, Ordained, Gen X, homosexual male (#1)

Another indicated the dynamic state of sexuality as she wrote,

“As my relationship moved toward marriage, it was difficult to see myself as celibate, for it did not jive [sic] with what I felt was my calling at that point. To be ‘found out’ could have, at the time, gotten me ‘in trouble.’”

- Married, Ordained ,Gen X, heterosexual female (#22)

I did have expectations entering into this experiment. I thought the survey would show that those practicing celibacy were unhappy about the mandate, but I honestly believed those who were required to be celibate were indeed practicing celibacy. I also expected my colleagues would welcome an opportunity for frank discussion regarding clerical sexuality, especially regarding the disciplinary rules that affect us all. What I didn’t expect were the uncomfortable snickers and the surprise at some of the language used on the survey.

Celibacy is more than merely adhering to the letter of the law. Celibacy can be a voluntary decision to express one's sexuality in a specific way, following the call of God. But celibacy that is required without explanation, discussion, preparation or support is a violation of clerical trust in the institution of the Church. The mandate is unjust to those forced to claim a way of being that is not their own. This project calls for action: First, it calls for the removal of the mandate. Secondly, if the requirement is removed or if it remains, the Church must provide proper training, support and discussion to prepare clergy for a life of celibacy. Currently, the requirement, as stated in the Book of Discipline without explanation, definition or resources does nothing to further the morality or curb the behavior of clergy. Our sample indicates not only the failure to adhere to the requirement but also the utter disregard for the requirement. A response to one of the questions says it all: "Does your understanding correspond with the understanding of the United Methodist Church?" one respondent wrote, "Does it matter?"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Clergy Subject #31.

## CHAPTER 2: UNITED METHODIST HISTORY

### NO POSSESSIONS OR BABES TO BIND ME: CLERICAL CELIBACY IN THE EARLY METHODIST MOVEMENT

The ability for clergy to marry, to have families, to settle down: this was a vital difference between the Roman Catholic model of ministry and that of the Protestant Reformers. Mandatory celibacy was rejected by John Wesley and the Early Methodists, replaced by a policy which allowed their traveling preachers to marry. But in practice, clerical marriage presented problems to the systemic foundation of the Methodist Movement. John Wesley established a variety of circuits through which the itinerant preachers would travel and their ability to travel often trumped the preacher's responsibilities of marriage and family life. Obligation to God and God's people took precedence to a wife and children, and a preacher's family bound him to a location.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, celibacy added to the ability for preachers to travel when and where they were needed, as Francis Asbury, America's preeminent traveling bishop, explained, "I have no possessions or babes to bind me to the soil."<sup>2</sup> But as more preachers married, bore children, bought homes and acquired a certain status in the community, Asbury found they were reluctant to itinerate. As more and more preachers "localized," the valued qualities of celibacy, poverty and itinerancy came into question. Wesley instructed his preachers to find happiness not in married or single life, but in service to God, therefore the duties of a preacher should not be altered, even when his family depended upon him. What was Wesley's policy on clerical marriage and how did

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<sup>1</sup> I use the masculine here because when Methodism began preachers were men, although female leadership did exist in the early movement. Women were not ordained in the Methodist Church until 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Asbury, *Journal*, 609.

Wesley's own experience with love affect such policy-making? As the American church grew, what position did Asbury hold on clerical celibacy and its link to itinerancy? In part one of this chapter, we begin at the beginning, with Wesley and the Early Methodists, to discover the intent of our historical fore-parents. In Part Two, we fast-forward in time to the events surrounding the 1984 General Conference and the decision to legislate clerical sexuality. With a solid understanding of our history, the distant past and more recent events, we may be able to craft a way forward.

As Protestants separated from the Church of Rome, many distinctions were emphasized between the Catholic Church and new Christian movements. One of these differences was Catholicism's insistence on clerical celibacy.<sup>3</sup> In a discussion of the relationship between his new movement and the Catholic Church, John Wesley explained that one "dangerous error in the Church of Rome is... forbidding the clergy to marry."<sup>4</sup> Why, Wesley asked, if marriage was considered a sacrament, were those in holy orders forbidden to partake of this practice that supposedly confers grace? The Catholic Church explained, through the Second Lateran Council, that those in holy orders, ordained clergy in the Roman Catholic church are "the temple of God, and it is a shameful thing that they should serve uncleanness."<sup>5</sup> To this Wesley replied,

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<sup>3</sup> Celibacy has long existed as a religious practice for clergy and lay people, not only in Catholicism, but in Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and a variety of indigenous and pagan religions.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Popery Calmly Considered" in The Works of John Wesley (London: Wesley Conference Office, 1872. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 10:154.

<sup>5</sup> Later. Concil. 2, Can.6, cited by John Wesley, "Roman Catechism and Reply" in The Works of John Wesley, 10:127.

The Apostle, on the contrary, saith, “Marriage is honourable in all;” (Heb. XIII.4;)<sup>6</sup> and gives a hard character of that doctrine which forbids it (1 Tim. IV.1-3)<sup>7</sup> And how lawful it was, the direction of the Apostle about it (1 Tim. III.2)<sup>8</sup> doth show. And how convenient it is, is manifest from the mischiefs attending the prohibition of it in the Romish Church, which wise men among themselves have lamented.<sup>9</sup>

To ban all clergy from marriage was illogical to Wesley, especially if the Church itself considered marriage a sacrament. In the 1808 Book of Discipline, the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church were published, collated against Wesley’s 1784 original text in The Sunday Service of the Methodists.<sup>10</sup> Among them Article 21, “On the Marriage of Ministers,” reflected Wesley’s assertion that clergy should be free to marry. It plainly states:

The ministers of Christ are not commanded by God’s law either to vow the estate of single life, or to abstain from marriage; therefore it is lawful for them, as for all other Christians, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same serve best to godliness.<sup>11</sup>

Thereby, Methodism accepted marriage as a possibility for their preachers and Wesley, in his supervisory role, encouraged acceptance of either lifestyle for his preachers. In a correspondence to John Dickins in 1790, Wesley expressed his surprise and disapproval at Lady Huntington who “absolutely forbade any preacher, in her Connexion to

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<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13: 4 states, “Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.” All scripture passages are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 4:3 states “They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.”

<sup>8</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2 states, “Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once.”

<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, “Roman Catechism and Reply”, Works of John Wesley, 128.

<sup>10</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 59.

<sup>11</sup> Book of Discipline (2004), 64. Interestingly, singleness and celibacy seem to be interchangeable terms, as sexual contact outside marriage was culturally unacceptable. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture, these two terms are extremely distinct. One can be single and not be celibate, involved in a committed sexual relationship with one person or in casual sexual relationships with several partners. This idea has become more and more socially acceptable and is now seen as quite normal.

marry.”<sup>12</sup> Explaining his own motivation to marry, Wesley asserted that *happiness* should not be the goal of marriage, for this is found “in the knowledge and enjoyment and service of God, whether in a married or single state.”<sup>13</sup> The option to marry or stay single remained with the individual and neither state was to be used as an excuse to push aside one’s responsibilities as a preacher. Wesley advised his preachers to continue with their duties, that it was “inconceivable that they should preach one less sermon or ride one less mile because they were engaged or married.”<sup>14</sup> Whether married or single, a parent or childless, each preacher was expected to uphold the strict discipline of holiness required by Wesley and the subsequent leaders of the movement, whether they be itinerant preachers or located pastors. Each individual had the freedom to choose his own familial structure. In his 1888 Systematic Theology, Thomas O. Summers, summarized the accepted Methodist position, echoing John Wesley’s use of the text from Hebrews 13:4.

The sum of all this is that marriage and celibacy are alike good, according to circumstances and particular persons. For some, the apostle says, it is better to marry, and marriage is honourable in all who properly enter that state, and the bed undefiled. For others it is better to remain unmarried, namely, those who have the gift of continence and have special evangelistic duties to perform, which can be performed better by celibates than by married persons.<sup>15</sup>

John Wesley’s own journey toward marriage was not an easy one. As a seven-year-old child, he declared that he would never marry, citing the impossible task of

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<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, Letter to John Dickins, June 19, 1790, in The Letters of John Wesley, ed. John Telford, vol. 8, standard ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 223.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, Letter to John Dickins, 223.

<sup>14</sup> G. Elsie Harrison, Son to Susanna: The Private Life of John Wesley (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1938), 242-43.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas O. Summers, Systematic Theology: A Complete Body of Wesleyan Arminian Divinity, 2 vols. (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1888), 2: 155.

finding a woman as virtuous as his mother.<sup>16</sup> Eventually, Wesley became involved with Grace Murray, a widowed co-worker in the Methodist movement. Respecting the mission of the movement and attempting to maintain his itinerant lifestyle, Wesley was convinced that God had called Grace Murray to his side to be his “fellow laborer in the Gospel.”<sup>17</sup> Apparently convinced that it was no sin to marry and that the marital bed was undefiled,<sup>18</sup> Wesley intended to take Grace as his wife. So, in 1749, in the presence of several witnesses Grace Murray and John Wesley swore an oath of allegiance one to another.<sup>19</sup> Was this oath analogous to marriage or was it merely a step to formalize their engagement?

In the October 1967 issue of the London Quarterly and Holburn Review, Dr. Frank Baker claimed that John Wesley actually *married* Grace Murray in 1749.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Baker refers to an Act of 1603 which was in effect at the time that “private spousals or marriage contracts were true marriages, even though they did not have full weight of marriages solemnized in the Church. Such private marriages remained legal and binding until 1754.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, under such a ‘spousal *de praesenti*’ Grace Murray became Wesley’s legal wife, technically subject to all other matrimonial procedures

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<sup>16</sup> Harrison, 245.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison, 243.

<sup>18</sup> Harrison, 245. There is a peculiar pattern that occurs with this text from Hebrews 13: 4 (“Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.”) John Wesley used it himself in his “Roman Catechism and Reply” to refute the Catholic position that banned marriage for those in holy orders. It then appeared in Thomas O. Summers’ Systematic Theology in 1888 and again in G. Elsie Harrison’s biography Son to Susanna in 1938. It could be a common text used in the vernacular to support clerical marriage, or perhaps Summers and Harrison were interpreting Wesley’s citation of the text. Whatever the case, I am inclined to believe that John Wesley was not altogether convinced, as Harrison suggests, that marriage was not a sin and that the marital bed undefiled.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, 261.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Baker, “John Wesley’s First Marriage,” London Quarterly and Holburn Review, 192, no. 3 (Oct. 1967): 305.

<sup>21</sup> Baker, 305.

and duties.<sup>22</sup> Although, the validity of this union has been the subject of much debate by Wesleyan scholars, Grace Murray was certainly Wesley's *intended*. Whether he would have gone through with a public marriage is debatable.

Wesley was first and foremost married to his work: he had birthed a vibrant Christian movement and much of its early success was dependent on Wesley himself. He was committed to his fellow Methodist preachers, to the Methodists in the Connection and to those disciples yet to be reached. Grace apparently loved him very much and she agreed to wait for a year to marry,<sup>23</sup> but a public marriage never occurred.<sup>24</sup> John's hesitancy, fueled by his brother's discontent and his own questions about the practicality of being a married itinerant, set forth several stumbling blocks that proved to be unyielding. To complicate matters, Grace was also pursued and courted by John Bennet, a preacher and Wesley's colleague.

Did Wesley actually intend to marry Grace Murray? Apparently, at some level, he did. He courted her and made an oath before witnesses that this was the case, that they were to be man and wife, but his actions indicated a certain reluctance to make a final commitment. According to biographer G. Elsie Harrison, Wesley provided Grace an ordered list of things to be accomplished before they were married. The couple needed to first satisfy John Bennet and make it clear to him that Wesley was the victor for Grace's hand. Next, they were to procure the consent of Charles Wesley, John's brother and partner in the movement. Finally, Wesley intended to "send an account of

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<sup>22</sup> Baker, 306.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Baker, "Some Observations on John Wesley's Relationship with Grace Murray," *Methodist History* 16 (Oct. 1977):43.

<sup>24</sup> Wesley did marry Mary Vazeille, a well-to-do widow and mother of four children, in 1751, but apparently theirs was a troubled marriage and she left him in 1758.

the reasons on which [he] proceeded to every helper and every society in England, at the same time desiring their prayers.”<sup>25</sup> But none of these conditions was fulfilled. The matter was never set straight with Bennet, Brother Charles never approved the marriage, and Wesley neither actively sought the prayers of the Methodist preachers nor the people.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Wesley continued to itinerate, leaving Grace for long periods of time wondering if they would ever be married. Apparently desperate, she begged Wesley, “Might [we] be married at once?”<sup>27</sup> At one point, in a typical Methodist manner, John took a piece of paper and he wrote out all the reasons for marriage and all the objections against it. He then listed all the qualities his wife should have, and then concluded, “Therefore all my seven arguments against marriage are totally set aside. Nay, some of them seem to prove both that I ought to marry and that Grace Murray is the Person.”<sup>28</sup>

But the demands of itinerancy complicated Wesley’s desire to be married to Grace. There was always another stop to make, another sermon to preach, another mile to travel before returning home. Harrison explained,

It was cruel but he never could make up his mind to belong to anyone except to himself and to God, and if he could put off the evil day he would be able to enjoy the present moment very much more to his satisfaction.<sup>29</sup>

Even if John had been more enthusiastic about marriage to Grace, it remains doubtful that they would have ever reached the altar, due to the dubious shenanigans of John’s brother Charles. A partner in the movement and a fruitful hymn writer, Charles

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<sup>25</sup> Harrison, 275.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick E. Maser, “John Wesley’s Only Marriage: An Examination of Dr. Frank Baker’s Article ‘John Wesley’s First Marriage,’” *Methodist History* 16 (Oct. 1977):36.

<sup>27</sup> Harrison, 274.

<sup>28</sup> Wesley, in Harrison, 289-90.

<sup>29</sup> Harrison, 275.

depended on the proliferation of the Methodist books to the masses. His income was directly derived from the success of the preachers, and most notably their leader, Brother John. The prospect of a marriage between John and Grace apparently sent waves of terror through Charles as he witnessed the threat of his “bread and butter disappearing out of the corner of his eye.”<sup>30</sup> As Wesley traveled, as his books were published, the money he earned never went into a savings account for his future wife and yet unborn children. According to Harrison, John’s income was being “drafted into the coffers of Brother Charles and of those other importunate members of the Wesley family.”<sup>31</sup> John was generous in his giving and he reportedly dispersed almost everything he owned. But now, with the prospect of a wife and children, Charles feared the end of his own income. Charles was insistent that this union not happen.

Charles confronted John and attempted to convince him to avoid this disparate match: “All our preachers will leave us, all our societies disperse if you marry so mean a woman.”<sup>32</sup> But John attempted to console his brother. “But let them know withal I should never marry any woman till I had proof that she both could and would travel with me.”<sup>33</sup> But Charles had other ideas, and he took Grace Murray, on the pretense of visiting his brother, to John Bennet. Charles told her that Brother John would have “nothing to do with her,” and left with no other option, she decided to marry John Bennet. Upon discovering his brother’s involvement in the Grace’s marriage to Bennet, John Wesley was certain that his relationship with Charles was destroyed. Eventually it was George Whitefield who played the peacemaker between the Wesley brothers and

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<sup>30</sup> Harrison, 285.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison, 285-86.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, 287.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison, 288.

they reconciled to a certain extent, although the Wesley brothers were never really cordial after this episode and Charles ceased itinerating in 1757.<sup>34</sup>

In Wesley's example, we are witness to the struggle that clerical marriage presents. Because itinerancy was so vital to the structure of the movement, it became a quandary: Shall I marry and subject my spouse to long periods of my absence? Shall I expect my spouse to accept such a life? Seemingly, Wesley was conflicted by divided loyalties, not only between the love and devotion he had for his brother and the love he shared with Grace, but also between the prospect of marriage and his work. How was he to be faithful to the call of God while maintaining a commitment to a loving spouse? Wesley's struggle sets the stage for Francis Asbury and his understandable reaction to the challenges of clerical marriage.

A lifelong celibate, Francis Asbury devoted himself to the Methodist movement in America and in doing so, committed wholly to his work. Explaining his continued unmarried state, his journal recounts the following. "I was called in my fourteenth year. I began my public exercises between sixteen and seventeen; at twenty-one I traveled; at twenty-six I came to America: thus far I had reasons enough for a single life."<sup>35</sup> But life, and world events, interfered with his plans:

It had been my intention of returning to Europe at thirty years of age, but the war continued, and it was ten years before we had a settled, lasting peace. This was no time to marry or be given in marriage.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Harrison, 308, and notes from Methodist scholar Ted Campbell.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Heart of Asbury's Journal*, ed. Ezra Squier Tipple (New York: Eaton and Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1904), 542-43.

<sup>36</sup> Asbury, *Heart*, 543.

At age forty-nine, Asbury was ordained superintendent bishop in America and his responsibilities included extensive travel. These duties emphasized the tension between itinerancy and marriage. In his journal, he wrote:

I could hardly expect to find a woman with grace enough to enable her to live but one week out of the fifty-two with her husband. Besides, what right has any man to take advantage of the affections of a woman, make her his wife, and by voluntary absence subvert the whole order and economy of the marriage state, by separating those whom neither God, nature, nor the requirements of civil society permit to put asunder? It is neither just nor generous.<sup>37</sup>

Asbury was seemingly convinced that marriage and itinerancy were incompatible, not only for himself but for the whole of the movement. His writings often bemoan the marriages of colleagues and the threat of impending locations of his preachers. In a May 1805 entry, Asbury reported the marriage of colleague Thomas Coke. Again, echoing the words of Hebrews 13:4, he wrote, “Marriage is honorable in all, but to me it is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the traveling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location.”<sup>38</sup> To be fair, Asbury was not so opposed to marriage per se, but to the subsequent *location* of the preacher. “Our preachers get wives and a home and run to their *dears* almost every night,” he explained, “how can they, by personal observation, know the state of the families it is part of their duty to watch over for good.”<sup>39</sup> If a preacher was too preoccupied with his own family, how was he to attend to others in need? This complicated dilemma – how to combine marriage and ministry – was enough of a struggle for Asbury himself, but with the added responsibility of

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<sup>37</sup> Asbury, Heart, 543.

<sup>38</sup> Asbury, Heart, 564.

<sup>39</sup> Asbury, Journal, 639.

ordaining and appointing preachers, Asbury's preference for clerical singlehood became more pronounced. Apparently, Asbury demonstrated this overt preference at the Virginia Conference in 1809, when he ordained only three married men of the eighty-four present.<sup>40</sup> During a session at the Baltimore Conference, he mumbled about the difficulty of stationing the preachers. At one point he exclaimed, "I would not give one single preacher for a half-dozen married ones."<sup>41</sup> The notes of the 1796 General Conference indicate that the sentiment went beyond Asbury, and that it was the accepted understanding.

The active, zealous, unmarried preachers may move on a large scale, and preach that ever-blessed gospel far more extensively through the sixteen states, and other parts of the continent; while the married preachers, whose circumstances require them, in many instances, to be more located than the single, will have a considerable field of action opened to them.<sup>42</sup>

Although his preference may have been that preachers remain unattached both of possessions and family, Asbury recognized the need to care for the dependents of his preachers. In 1800 the General Conference, under Asbury's leadership, allowed eighty dollars per year for a traveling preacher's wife or widow besides the sixteen-dollar stipend for each child under seven and the twenty-four dollars for each child between the ages of seven and fourteen.<sup>43</sup> This may not seem like a fortune, but with the poverty of the American Methodists, every penny was valued. Furthermore, pooled with the

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<sup>40</sup> Russell E. Richey, The Methodist Conference in America: A History (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1996), 58.

<sup>41</sup> William Wallace Bennet, Memorials of Methodism in Virginia (Richmond, 1871), 551, as cited in Salter, 269.

<sup>42</sup> Methodist Episcopal Church, Journals of the General Conference, vol. 1, 1796-1836 (New York: Carlton & Phillips 1855), 11-12. The citation is from 1796.

<sup>43</sup> L.C. Rudolph, Francis Asbury (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), 107.

pennies of others in the connection, the collection could be shared and distributed throughout the connection as needed.

Wesley often used the phrase “in connexion” to indicate those people, groups and communities who were in fellowship with one another. This connection formed a network of groups and their leaders, united in thought and purpose. From this connection, resources were made available as those in the connection shared their wealth of information, programmatic opportunities and funds so that vital ministry could be facilitated. Itinerancy was the “overarching framework connecting each Methodist circuit and society to the larger whole, making it possible to efficiently distribute the movement’s resources wherever they might have the most telling impact.”<sup>44</sup> The Wesleyan model of itinerancy was designed to allow one central authority, namely Wesley himself, to deploy leadership resources where he determined they were most needed.<sup>45</sup> This allowed for the whole of the connection to affect the mission of Methodism to an extent and in a manner that was greater and more impacting than any one local congregation could do on its own. To gather the resources of many and distribute them where they were most needed: this was the strength of Wesley’s original connection, and is the strength of *our* connection today. The connectional system allows us to take advantage of the gifts and talents of our leaders, to minimize the limitations of our leaders and also provides us an ability to spread

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<sup>44</sup> John H. Wigger, Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 33.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Heitzenrater, “Connectionalism and Itinerancy: Wesleyan Principles and Practice,” in Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity, ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 31.

resources over a broad area.<sup>46</sup> Expressing the import of itinerancy among Methodists, traveling preacher William Beauchamp explained, “Itinerancy is the life of Methodism...Destroy this, and you will destroy Methodism.”<sup>47</sup>

Essentially involved in one’s ability to itinerate was the ability to move: this necessarily demanded simplicity in life. For example, Asbury’s possessions were rumored to be barely more than he could place in his saddlebags. Another example of the hardships of itinerancy can be witnessed in the words of future bishop Robert Roberts, a married preacher with children, who auctioned off almost all of his earthly belongings in order to accept his appointment.<sup>48</sup>

Such inconveniences and losses are always more or less, connected with the itinerant life. But it has its moral. It cuts the man entirely loose from the world... And if he and his family are not prepared by these trying events to be heavenly-altogether heavenly, without even a shred of the earthly, the sensual, or the devilish, appertaining to them, either really or in appearance, then let them return whence they came and leave the itinerancy to those of the right spirit. They should neither touch, taste nor handle it.<sup>49</sup>

Voluntary poverty and celibacy both include the renunciation of “dependents.” No longer was there need for external resources for survival; one could trust the resources God would provide and the resources of self to achieve any goal. This was a philosophical idea that also had practical implications. The celibate itinerant needed little funding, for he would depend on the generosity of those in the connection to support himself and his ministry. If one had family at home, this became more

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<sup>46</sup> Heitznerater, 36.

<sup>47</sup> William Beauchamp, Letters on the Call and Qualifications of Ministers of the Gospel. and on the Parliamentary History of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1912), 196 as cited in Wigger, 34

<sup>48</sup> Darius L. Salter, America’s Bishop: The Life of Francis Asbury (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 2003), 282.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Elliot, The Life of Robert Roberts (Cincinnati: J.F. Wright and L. Swormstedt, 1844) 101-02 as cited in Salter, 282.

problematic. How could the traveling preacher earn enough to care for a wife and children? This funding was designated to the connection.<sup>50</sup>

As with any resources available, we need to recognize the different resources available to us in the experiences of both celibate and married clergy. A similar distinction was made between the itinerant preachers and those preachers who became located, settled with home and family in one community. In 1799 it was estimated that there were 850 local preachers but only 269 itinerant preachers active in the United States. Years later Francis Asbury counted 1610 local preachers, compared to 597 itinerants.<sup>51</sup> While the itinerants were salaried, voting members of their respective annual conferences, local preachers were not, in fact local preachers had little or no financial support from the church. Each contributed to the mission of the Methodist movement in a different way. The traveling preacher maintained the integrity of itinerancy, providing the resources available from the whole of the connection for each community on his circuit. Whereas the located preacher maintained and organized one specific community, developed lay leadership and cared for the people, until the next visit by the circuit rider. Inherent within the conceptual foundation of Methodism is the traveling preacher and celibacy assisted in the preacher's ability to move. But neither Wesley nor Asbury legislated clerical sexuality. They established expectations that clergy would uphold the strict rules of holiness, but not until 1984 did the United Methodist Church incorporate celibacy into disciplinary standards for clerical life.

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<sup>50</sup> There are other distinctions between celibate and married preachers, but funding for the Early Methodists was of vital import. This was a poor people's movement, and funding was extremely limited; therefore any additional expenses made a great impact on the entire system.

<sup>51</sup> Wigger, 31.

## THE SEVEN LAST WORDS

Long after Protestantism established itself distinctly from the sexual restrictions of the Roman Catholic Church, The United Methodist Church established a policy of clerical celibacy. In an attempt to control the sex lives of its unmarried, and more precisely its homosexual, clergy, the 1984 General Conference inserted into Ordination requirements what came to be known as the “seven last words”: “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.” Although the words were adopted and the policy went into effect in 1984, this was the culmination of a battle that had been raging since 1972, when the word “homosexuality” first appeared in The Book of Discipline.<sup>52</sup> Although not an explicit ban on homosexual clergy, the language made it clear: sex was for married people. Those who were not – or could not be – legally married were to be celibate. The impact of the seven last words has affected all single clergy since 1984 – both gay and straight – but initially it began as a way to solve the “homosexual problem.”

In 1968, at the height of the sexual revolution, a commission was established to revamp the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, the conscience of the denomination. The Commission met for four years and when the General Conference reconvened in 1972 in Atlanta Georgia, they presented their report. The Commission’s report did not contain a condemnation of homosexuality, but from the floor, an amendment was proposed to insert the following into the section of the Social Principles entitled “Human Sexuality”:

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<sup>52</sup> Bishop Jack Tuell, “How I Changed My Mind,” speech presented at Claremont United Methodist Church, Claremont, CA, 18 May 2003.

We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.<sup>53</sup>

The amendment was approved and has remained intact since 1972.

In 1980, there was an attempt to remove the aforementioned clause. William O. Walker, a delegate from the Oregon-Idaho Conference, moved to delete the phrase.

We have acted as if one particular part of our activity is really not covered by grace engulfing and redeeming us all; so that when we have a word that speaks of incompatibility, we are saying there are those persons to whom that feels like this allows us not to be a part of the household of faith.<sup>54</sup>

The amendment was defeated with 729 delegates voting to retain the language and 225 voting to remove it, 8 abstained.

Also in 1980, Ordination requirements were addressed. In the Committee on Higher Education and Ministry Report, a revision of the footnote to Paragraph 404 was proposed. The revision emphasized trust in the process of examining candidates for ordination, but from the floor a motion was made. A. Jason Shirah from the South Georgia Annual Conference moved the inclusion of the following phrase into the text of the footnote: "No self-avowed, practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in the United Methodist Church." Citing the need for a more direct and clear statement about homosexual ordination, Mr. Shirah explained, "I am persuaded that this General Conference will do the church a service as it speaks with a good clear sound voice on this issue."<sup>55</sup> The amendment was defeated and the original phrasing was adopted. Why mention this amendment if it was soundly defeated? In 1984 this

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<sup>53</sup> Book of Discipline, Social Principles, Paragraph 71f.

<sup>54</sup> Journal of the 1980 General Conference (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1980), 275.

<sup>55</sup> Journal of the 1980 General Conference, 317.

language made a reappearance in a surprising stunt that would change The Discipline and, along with the mandate for celibacy, seriously complicate the ordination process for homosexual clergy.

In February of 1983, Bishop Jack Tuell had finished a speaking engagement at The Women's Clergy Conference in New Mexico and, in the Albuquerque airport, he met with two other bishops and an executive from the Division of Ordained Ministry from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. There the four men sat in the airport lounge and it being "the time of year to put together legislation for General Conference",<sup>56</sup> they formulated the language for a proposal to address the question of clerical sexuality. The motivation for the proposal was the ongoing controversy on homosexuality, although its language was generic, its impact was widespread. There, in the Albuquerque airport, they scratched out seven words to add to the requirements for candidates for the ministry: "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness."<sup>57</sup>

Because of the ongoing debate about homosexuality in the Church in general, and the ordination of gay clergy in particular, the proposed amendment to Paragraph 404 in the 1984 United Methodist Book of Discipline was published in pre-Conference materials before the General Conference met in May of 1984. The May 14<sup>th</sup> issue of *Christianity and Crisis* published two essays about the proposed legislation: one by theologian and professor Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr., and the other by Rev. Charles F. Kirkley, chair of the Baltimore Conference on Ordained Ministry. In his essay entitled "Is the Church Ready to Legislate on Sex?" Cobb noted that the United Methodist Church had been virtually silent on the topic of sex for fifty years, apparently in an

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<sup>56</sup> Bishop Jack Tuell, telephone conversation with the author, 3 Dec. 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Tuell, conversation.

attempt to retain both the conservatives and the “experimenters” in the church.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, Cobb explained, this reluctance to adequately discuss sex and sexuality left the church impudent to begin legislation on the topic. Cobb also argued, by using biblical sources, that this model – “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” – is not a model from the Bible:

The Bible reflects and sanctions several ways of dealing with sexuality, ranging from the multiple wives and concubines of the patriarchs and kings of Israel to the lifelong chastity that seems to have been favored by Jesus and Paul. But I do not know where the exact pattern now being proposed is reflected or supported.<sup>59</sup>

The underlying hypocrisy, Cobb found, involved the church’s condemnation of sex between unmarried partners. “This legislation will either create a double standard for clergy and laity or else signal a serious intention on the part of the church to condemn typical sexual behavior of a vast portion of our unmarried populations in and out of our churches.”<sup>60</sup> Cobb suggested a different approach. “Would it not be better to work carefully toward a full statement of our present collective United Methodist ideal about sex?”<sup>61</sup> Sexuality is a difficult matter and difficult matters require us to do some “hard thinking rather than to try and settle matters by a majority vote.”<sup>62</sup>

Charles F. Kirkley was senior minister of St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Kensington, Maryland and chair of the Baltimore Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry. His essay entitled “Fidelity in Marriage...celibacy in singleness: a standard for ministry” appeared side-by-side John Cobb’s in the May 14<sup>th</sup> issue of

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<sup>58</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., “Is the Church Ready to Legislate on Sex?” Christianity and Crisis 44, no. 8 (May 14, 1984): 182.

<sup>59</sup> Cobb, 183.

<sup>60</sup> Cobb, 183.

<sup>61</sup> Cobb, 185.

<sup>62</sup> Cobb, 185.

*Christianity and Crisis* and served as a rebuttal to Cobb's arguments. This addition, Kirkley asserts, would call the ordained to the highest moral standards. "Self denial is not an end in itself; rather a means to this end, namely a consecrated life committed to the Christ."<sup>63</sup> According to Kirkley, the Church should not reflect contemporary cultural mores in regard to sexuality. Instead the Church, should set a higher standard, in order to protect the institution.

Those who prefer to think there is no breach of morality in sexual activity between single persons may well have difficulty in accepting this interpretation and the accompanying concept of restraint. However, both the committee, the division and the Board of Higher Education and Ministry by endorsing this proposed legislation, are expressing their conviction about an issue which must be addressed.<sup>64</sup>

When it came to the floor in 1984, William K. Quick, a delegate from Detroit, introduced and explained the report from the Committee on Ordained and Diaconal Ministry. The report proposed a revision of Paragraph 404.4e, the requirements for the Certified Candidate. Quick said,

In one of the steps for candidacy, one agrees for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world and the most effective witness to the Christian gospel and in consideration of the influence of ministers, to make a complete dedication of themselves to the highest ideals of the Christian life as set forth in Paragraphs 67 to 76 of our Social Principles, and to this end agree to exercise responsible self control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity. And to that very point, the words "*fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness*" would be inserted. And it follows, "Social responsibility and growth in grace and the knowledge and love of God."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Kirkley, "Fidelity in Marriage...Celibacy in Singleness," *Christianity and Crisis* 44, no. 8 (May 14, 1984): 186.

<sup>64</sup> Kirkley, 187.

<sup>65</sup> *Journal of the 1984 General Conference*, vol.1 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 337, emphasis added.

When Mr. Quick was finished and questions were answered, the General Conference heard two rebuttals. John V. Moore (Cal-Nevada) presented Minority Report A, proposing the retention of the language of the 1980 Discipline with no additions. Moore noted that Minority Report A reaffirms the process, takes the Constitution seriously as well as the authority it grants. “And finally,” Moore said, “Minority Report A reaffirms the decisions of the General Conference of 1976 and 1980.”<sup>66</sup>

Minority Report B was presented by David A. Seamonds from the Kentucky Annual Conference and included stronger language to ensure the prohibition of ordination and subsequent appointment of homosexual clergy. Seamonds noted, in his rejection of the report including the so-called “seven last words,”<sup>67</sup> the 907 petitions received from individuals, administrative boards, charge conferences and councils on ministries, calling for clear and specific language.

Friends, this is a call from the grass roots. It is a shout from the whole forest of the church. They are pleading for a certain sound from the General Conference trumpet and the seven last words do not give us a certain sound, because there is no definition of either celibacy or marriage in the legislative body of The Discipline.<sup>68</sup>

If Minority Report A passed, the language from 1976 and 1980 General Conferences would be retained and the seven last words, with their mandate for celibacy, would not have been an issue. If Minority Report B passed, the rights of homosexual clergy for ordination and appointment would have been seriously impinged. After much discussion about the Committee Report and its two rebuttals, Robert Phelps (Yellowstone) made an amendment that would change the language in

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<sup>66</sup> Journal of the 1984 General Conference, vol.1, 339.

<sup>67</sup> These words are “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.”

<sup>68</sup> Journal of the 1984 General Conference, vol.1, 340.

the original Committee report to explain the role of sexuality in this decision. “I invite, indeed I plead with you my friends, to incorporate language that commits the United Methodist Church to a rediscovery of celibacy within a context that (a) celebrates under God our sexual identities; (b) witnesses to the new life of the Kingdom that Jesus has inaugurated; and (c) encourages sexual relationships only within the context of mutual affirmation.”<sup>69</sup> Charles F. Kirkley spoke against the Phelps’ plea for further exploration of sexuality in the context of the phrase and the amendment was defeated.

Again, the opponents of the seven last words rallied, and another attempt was made to refine the language referring to celibacy in the phrase. Durward McCord, a delegate from Tennessee, moved to amend the report by substituting “spiritual responsibility between male and female in singleness” for “celibacy in singleness.” Once again, the amendment was defeated.

At one point, Richard L. Wright from West Virginia asked a question about the intended meaning of the word “celibacy” in the report. Mr. Quick responded,

The word ‘celibacy’, and I hope I can go back to my high school Latin days, comes from the Latin ‘caelebatus’ which means the condition of being unmarried. But the definition of the United Church of Canada, and bishop, I will remind the delegates we are not as a committee bringing in definitions with this legislation, but the definition of the United Church of Canada, since one has been requested, is “abstinence from genital sexual activity between two persons.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Journal of the 1984 General Conference, vol.1, 340. Incidentally, Phelps’ amendment is akin to my position regarding the importance of the exploration of celibacy in the context of sexuality as a gift of God. Phelps’ language regarding the encouragement of relationships in “mutual affirmation” emphasizes the self-determination of the individual in the choice in how one expresses one’s own sexuality. Had Phelps’ amendment passed, my project would not exist.

<sup>70</sup> The Journal of the 1984 General Conference, vol.1, 341. From the Online Etymology Dictionary, available at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=celibacy> : “celibacy” derived in English from the Latin *caelibatus* meaning a “state of being unmarried.”

The questioner, Mr. Wright, moved to amend the report by adding an additional footnote to Paragraph 404 to contain the definition of ‘celibacy’ as given by Mr. Quick. This would provide a practical understanding of the expectations of the General Conference. But Mr. Wright’s amendment was defeated and the definition was left out of the 1984 Discipline and subsequent editions.

When it came time to vote, both rebuttals and the original Committee Report were addressed. Minority Report B, to prohibit outright the ordination and appointment of homosexuals, was put to a vote and was defeated by a small margin of only 22 votes: 496 against, 474 for. Minority Report A, the proposal to keep Paragraph 404 as it had been in 1976 and 1980, was put to a vote and was defeated. But the committee report was adopted and the seven last words were inserted into the requirements for candidacy and ordination, where they remain to this day.

In an unexpected move, William W. Morris (Tennessee) purposed the “self-avowed practicing” language be inserted into Paragraph 402.2.<sup>71</sup> The Committee Report passed and the requirement for celibacy in singleness virtually guaranteed homosexual clergy would be restricted by the mandate, but apparently, the seven last words were not enough. The “self-avowed practicing” language had been introduced at the 1980 General Conference as a proposed amendment to a footnote of paragraph 404, but was defeated. If Mr. Morris’ amendment passed, the efforts of Bishop Tuell and his companions in the Albuquerque airport would be in vain. The requirement for “celibacy in singleness” was intended to curb the desire for a stronger statement about homosexual clergy. Mr. Quick spoke against the amendment, on behalf of the

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<sup>71</sup> “No self-avowed, practicing homosexual therefore shall be ordained or appointed in the United Methodist Church.”

legislative session. But Mr. Morris's amendment was adopted, 525 for, 442 against, and thus homosexual clergy were bound to celibacy through Paragraph 404.4e and bound to silence by Paragraph 402.2.

In its attempt to curb the sexual practices of its homosexual clergy, the 1984 General Conference imposed mandatory celibacy on one faction of its clergy: those who are single, thereby reinforcing the boundaries of "appropriate sexual expression." As one agrees to the vow, one agrees that he/she is only to engage in sexual activity in the marital union, a state which remains legally impossible for homosexuals and unappealing to those not called to partnership.

This seven-word mandate restricts the sexual expression of single clergy, thereby curbing the personal freedom one has in determining his/her own future. If we honor sexuality and accept it as a gift from God, what justifications allow the Church to govern the sexual expression of a faction of clergy? Moral standards for clergy should be maintained, clerical behavior should be legal and healthy, and clerical relationships should be mutual, nurtured in an environment of respect and love. But how far does the power of the Church extend? Sexuality is more than behavior; it has to do with *being*: who we are and how we interact with others. Through the mandate requiring single clergy to live celibately, the Church unjustly identifies the behavior of one faction of clergy to govern, then uses its power to determine the appropriate and inappropriate mode of being for an individual in ministry. This not only strips some clergy of personal freedom, but denigrates the valid call to celibacy as experienced by others. The mandate is unjust and unfair and should be removed from The Book of Discipline, in order to allow our clergy to live the life to which they are called: to singlehood, to

partnership, to marriage, or to celibacy. Each choice is valid and can be lived with integrity, equipping the Church with a clergy that possesses a variety of gifts, talents and callings.

## CHAPTER 3: TAKING ON THE EXTREMES

As a celibate myself, it is tempting to justify my own decision by presenting a clear case for the benefits of celibacy and declaring celibacy superior to partnered life. Since I've found joy and wisdom in the decision to be a celibate, you will too! But sexual expression is not that simple – *who we are* as sexual beings cannot be decided in a “one-size-fits-all” kind of way. We each are made uniquely and in our particularity there exists the problem. Through legislation of sexuality, the Church attempts to categorize us and then determines what behavior is appropriate for a member of the clergy and what is inappropriate. But each of us understands our own sexuality differently and through our God-given free will, we must be allowed to express that self as God created us to be. What good are we if our expression of self is stunted, damaged or kept closeted in some way? In order to develop a clear understanding of the role of celibacy in sexual self-expression, we move to the extreme models. The first model from Roman Catholicism uplifts the value of celibacy, but requires it for all clergy. The second model from Feminism and Paganism illuminates the innate problems with legislating sex, but declares little value in celibacy. Hopefully, by examining the extremes, we will be able to construct *a third way* to understand celibacy, as one form of voluntary sexual expression.

### THE ROMAN CATHOLIC MODEL: CALLED TO MINISTRY, CALLED TO CELIBACY

What are the benefits of celibacy? Francis Asbury, as detailed in Chapter Two, extolled the virtues of celibacy for his traveling preachers, particularly the ability to itinerate. As a charism, a gift given by God, celibacy can provide single-minded attention to the work of God, without the distractions of marriage and family life. According to

traditional doctrines of the body based on philosophical dualism, celibacy can be used as a means to overcome the desires of the flesh. The Roman Catholic model postulates that if these benefits are valuable to the church and its hierarchy, then celibacy should be adopted for all clergy. So, as a comparison, we must ask, “Are single clergy in the United Methodist Church designated specially for itinerancy?” No; itinerancy is required of all clergy in the United Methodist Church. “Are single clergy in the United Methodist Church alone in their need for single-minded attention to the work of God?” No; all clergy are challenged with distractions. Because all clergy are required to itinerate and all clergy need the capacity for single-minded attention to the work of God, and celibacy provides such benefits, this model determines celibacy be adopted by all clergy.

Since 1139 CE, the Roman Catholic Church has mandated celibacy for all priests. The Second Lateran Council, summoned by Pope Innocent II, decreed clerical marriage to be a violation of ecclesiastical law.<sup>1</sup> Canons Six, Seven and Eight ensured clerical celibacy in a number of ways. Canon Six declared clergy who have taken wives or concubines are to be “deprived of their position and ecclesiastical benefice.”<sup>2</sup> Canon Seven prohibited congregations from hearing masses of those known to have wives or concubines, citing that the “law of continence and the purity pleasing to God might be propagated among ecclesiastical persons and those in holy orders, we decree that where bishops, priests, deacons, subdeacons, canons regular, monks and professed lay brothers have presumed to take wives and so transgress this holy precept, they are to be separated from their

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<sup>1</sup> Second Lateran Council, Thirty Canons of the Second Lateran Council, online, accessed 4 May 2007; available from [www.piar.hu/councils/ecum10.htm](http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum10.htm). Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, ed. Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990.)

<sup>2</sup> Second Lateran Council, Canon Six.

partners.”<sup>3</sup> Canon Eight reinforced celibacy, not only for its male priests, but also to women religious, “if, God forbid, they attempt to marry.”<sup>4</sup>

Celibacy has been historically highly valued in the Roman Catholic Church. Even after the clergy abuse scandals in the American Catholic Church, even amid the call for a married priesthood, the Vatican maintains the value of clerical celibacy. In November of 2006, Pope Benedict XVI issued a public statement about the sanctity of priestly celibacy. The Pope gathered together the top Roman Curia cardinals to discuss the case of Archbishop Emanuel Milingo of Zambia. In 2001, Archbishop Milingo renounced his vow of celibacy by marrying a South Korean woman in Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. After a public apology and the Vatican's reprimand, he again gained notoriety in September of 2006 by ordaining four American men, who just happened to be married.<sup>5</sup> According to a November 2006 article in Time Magazine, The Vatican, amid the Milingo scandal, affirmed celibacy as an important tradition to maintain, and added that the lack of training was to blame for Milingo's actions.

The value of the choice of priestly celibacy, according Catholic tradition, has been reaffirmed, and the need for solid human and Christian training, for seminarians as well as already ordained priests, has been reiterated.<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, the Roman Catholic Church has had more experience in dealing with clerical celibacy than the two-hundred-and-seventy-year-old Methodist Movement, and even as the American Catholic Church has been plagued with sexual abuse scandals, and

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<sup>3</sup> Second Lateran Council, Canon Seven.

<sup>4</sup> Second Lateran Council, Canon Eight.

<sup>5</sup> Jeff Israely, “The Pope Lays Down the Law on Celibacy,” Time Magazine, Nov. 2006 [magazine online]; accessed 25 Jan. 2007; available from [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1560503,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1560503,00.html).

<sup>6</sup> Israely.

the call for a married priesthood, I believe we can learn from the Roman Catholic model and its preparation of priests for a life of celibacy.

In an effort to research the method by which priests are prepared to live as celibates, I visited St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California; one of three Roman Catholic seminaries on the West Coast. Enrollment is approximately 102 seminarians and those will serve nine dioceses in the Los Angeles area. Los Angeles is the largest archdiocese in the country serving 4 ½ million Catholics, and that translates to about 4 seminarians ordained as priests a year.<sup>7</sup>

The current celibacy formation program has been in effect for about ten years. Before the current program was in place, students had no formal training in living the vow of celibacy. Father Jim Clarke, Director of Spiritual Formation at St. John's, explains "I'm an [alumnus] of this school and we didn't even have a class about celibacy. Anytime we'd talk about it, it would be a joke...teasing about it. But a class, or how-to's or practical ideas: nothing."<sup>8</sup>

The goal of the Celibacy Formation at St. John's Seminary is stated as follows in its written materials: "to provide seminarians with a [holistic] and integrative process that supports growth toward a healthy and holy priestly way of life."<sup>9</sup> This is accomplished through an admissions assessment of each candidate, a series of Intensive Workshops, retreat days and spiritual conferences, on-site spiritual and psychological direction, and various self- and mentor- evaluations. To begin their studies students engage in a two-day workshop, an immersion program, which involves a foundation of human sexuality from an

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<sup>7</sup> Father Jim Clarke, Director of Spiritual Formation, St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, CA. Conversation with the author, 8 Nov. 2005. Obviously the American Catholic Church is facing its own crisis regarding a celibate priesthood, demonstrated by the small number of priests ordained per year.

<sup>8</sup> Father Clarke, conversation with the author, 8 Nov. 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Celibacy Formation Program, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, CA, 2004-2005, 1.

anthropological as well as a theological perspective. Throughout the two days, students are involved in small group interactions, question and answer sessions, presentations, large-group discussions, prayer and the Eucharist. The second day deals primarily with healthy psycho-sexual development with a visiting psychologist. In addition, Father Clarke, who has a background in counseling, presents the spiritual and moral aspects of celibacy.

After students complete the first year of their education, they have a summer component called Intensive Period of Spiritual Formation (IPSF - A), which lasts for one month. The goals of this program are to “encourage the development of a life of personal prayer and to acknowledge the importance of self-knowledge for the development of an authentic life.”<sup>10</sup> Components include Prayer, Myers-Briggs Personality Profile, Relationships, Sexuality, Celibacy and Psycho-sexual Integration, types of Spirituality and Silence.<sup>11</sup>

The next year is called Internship year, in which seminarians are placed in the parish. At the conclusion of the program, they are evaluated by the parish staff and the priest.

After the Internship Year, the students return to the seminary and undergo another Intensive conference, called IPSF-B. Students spend some time learning about the spirituality of a Diocesan priest. The written materials explain: “during this period priests in ministry come to talk to the seminarians, telling their own stories of struggle and victory and stressing the importance of prayer. It is during these dialogues that celibacy is talked

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<sup>10</sup> Celibacy Formation Program, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Celibacy Formation Program, 2.

about in a very effective and practical way.”<sup>12</sup> After the third and fourth years of seminary training is completed, and students are ordained priests.

During their term at the seminary, each student has a Faculty Advisor and a Spiritual Director and access to an on-campus psychologist. The Department of Spiritual Formation offers conferences and workshops to develop the spiritual lives of the students, to include discussions about differentiating between healthy touch and unhealthy touch, maintaining a healthy sense of self-care, nourishment, even hygiene.

St. John’s is an on-campus facility, so the students practice celibacy for the six-year period they are enrolled. Clarke also notes that in the application process, the students are asked quite directly about their practice of celibacy. Clarke says, they are asked, “How long have you been celibate? If it hasn’t been at least a year [they are encouraged to reapply]...it’s part of the admission’s policy.”<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to the statements of Pope Benedict XVI, the training current seminarians receive is extensive: six years of on-campus training, classes and seminars, access to counselors and psychologists, and resources to help when things get rough. The program at St. John’s is relatively new, only ten years old, so perhaps in time, diocesan priests will be psycho-sexually healthier than older priests who may not have benefited from such a program. As priests leave seminary and enter parish life, the structure of their celibacy

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<sup>12</sup> Celibacy Formation Program, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Father Clarke, conversation, 8 Nov. 2005. What happens if a student has a problem with celibacy? To whom can they turn? Clarke answers, “We encourage them to talk with their spiritual director. If the spiritual director feels like this needs to be handled in a public forum, they’d say “You need to talk to your faculty advisor.” The other direction is a recommendation to see our on-site psychologist. And He would take the case or refer it to an outsider – to a specialist in the field.” What happens if a diocesan priest has a problem with celibacy? To whom would they turn? Clarke responds, “Again, the first line probably for the priest is his spiritual director, or close friends, but as I’ve discovered, most of us priests tend to call a spiritual director first and/or confessor first. That probably gives you a sense of the shame or embarrassment.” Students are also encouraged to form small faith sharing groups while in seminary and, after ordination, to join a priest’s support group.

training disappears and this may leave the priest lost in the attempt to live celibately. Catholic authors identify two essential tools essential in the preparation of celibates and in maintaining the lifestyle: prayer and community.

Author A.W. Richard Sipe writes, “Prayer is the foundation out of which living waters spring to enliven our work and all our relationships.”<sup>14</sup> Because celibate love is so demanding, Sipe explains, “It cannot exist without firm foundations laid daily and reinforced daily in prayer.”<sup>15</sup> Sipe does not mince words as he emphasizes the importance of prayer in celibate life. “There is *no* possibility of participating seriously in the celibate process or any hope of achieving celibacy without a solid grounding in prayer.”<sup>16</sup>

Why is prayer so vital? If one makes a vow to commit one’s whole self, including one’s sexuality, to God, prayer provides time and space to cultivate the relationship between the individual and God. If one makes a decision for celibacy in the contemporary West, many hurdles exist in our couple-centered, family-centered culture. Prayer is essential as a spiritual discipline to remind oneself about the *gain* of celibate life. What is the gain? This, understandably, differs for each person who chooses celibacy: the building of Christ’s Kingdom, the ability to focus one’s energy on God’s work, the ability to travel as the work requires. Whatever the gain for the individual, prayer can help to connect us with that purpose and with the God whom we serve.

Community is another element that has proven beneficial to those living without an immediate family. Author Sandra M. Schneiders explains,

Because the celibate life is under constant threat, not only from those who would violate it by force (which was always a concern of Church authorities in their cloistering of women celibates) but by the cultural

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<sup>14</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 185.

<sup>15</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 185.

<sup>16</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 54.

ethos that has rarely if ever fostered sexual restraint, Religious have found strength in the community of those who have made the same choice.<sup>17</sup>

As seminarians enter St. John's seminary, they are immediately incorporated into a celibate community in connection with others who share similar life experiences, challenges and questions. "Living in community with others," attest the written materials, "allows the seminarian to develop and nurture healthy relationships in an environment of mutual respect, especially with peers who share the journey toward ordained ministry."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, when men or women enter monastic life or religious orders, community is a given. When a priest leaves seminary and enters parish life, the threat of isolation looms large. Suddenly the benefits of community life are gone and the individual is left to develop a community of his/her own...or not. This may be a detriment to one's sexual health. Sipe writes, "If celibacy is to thrive, it must be able to withstand the rigorous demands of unrequited loving service."<sup>19</sup> Community is one way to counter that threat. The celibate "needs others who can nourish and sustain his or her capacity for celibate engagement."<sup>20</sup>

Prayer and Community are essential tools for Catholic celibates, but are certainly not the only components of healthy celibate life. Service, work, altruism, and relationships can all be components developing a healthy celibate life. The students at St. John's focus on creative expression – poetry, art and music – to make physical the inner life. With these tools, celibacy can be used to accomplish God's work in the world, but Roman Catholics recognize it is not a lifestyle possible for all. Celibacy is a *charism*, a gift given by God.

Author Alfons Maria Cardinal Stickler explains:

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<sup>17</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy, and Community in Catholic Religious Life (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Celibacy Formation Program, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 171.

<sup>20</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 186.

The priesthood of the New Testament ... involves the very nature of the person and therefore the whole man; a priest, the totality of his being is fundamentally involved in all his ministry. Christ wants the soul, heart and body of his priests.<sup>21</sup>

But unlike Protestantism, the charism of celibacy and the call to ministry are intricately connected. As one is called to ministry, s/he is also called to celibacy. "They enter Religious Life," Schneiders writes, "because they feel called to give themselves freely to Christ in a way that excludes other primary life commitments, including marriage."<sup>22</sup> However, one cannot choose nor accomplish celibacy on one's own.

Both the vocation itself and the capacity to live it are gifts of God that are not superior to other vocations in the Church but are specific and distinct and require, if they are to be lived healthily and holily, an intense life of prayer, asceticism, and commitment.<sup>23</sup>

If celibacy is a gift of God, how does the Church justify a mandated charism? Clarke explains,

It's a tough answer but I'll give you the party line... It's the whole idea that part of the call is to be celibate. If you're not called to celibacy, you're not called to the priesthood. That's how it's joined together. However, as you probably would guess, it really is theologically weak... I believe in celibacy as a real virtue and a real call and a real gift, but it's not given to everybody.<sup>24</sup>

The United Methodist Church requires single clergy to be celibate, but provides neither adequate preparation nor any justification for such a mandate. If the gains of celibacy are deemed worthy, justice requires all clergy to live celibately. If not, celibacy should be required for none.

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<sup>21</sup> Alfons Maria Cardinal Stickler, The Case for Clerical Celibacy: Its Historical Development and Theological Foundations (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 97.

<sup>22</sup> Schneiders, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Schneiders, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Father Clarke, conversation, 8 Nov. 2005.

## THE MODEL FROM FEMINISM AND PAGANISM: CELIBACY LEAVES ONE SPIRITLESS

“If anyone would come after me,” Jesus instructs his disciples, “one must deny oneself and take up one’s cross, and follow me.”<sup>25</sup> Generations of Christians, yearning for a life of devoted discipleship, have read these words in the Gospel of Mark and have attempted to obey Jesus’ command. But how much of our *selves* do we need to deny? With a solid foundation of philosophical dualism, Christian tradition tells us to deny our *physical* selves in deference to the actions of our mind/soul.<sup>26</sup> Dualism, this valuation of mind/soul over body, promotes an unhealthy view of the body, especially in regard to sexuality, sexual expression and sexual identity. Dualism has lead the Christian Church into structures that foster a hatred of the flesh in varying degrees and has encouraged doctrines that seek to repress one’s sexuality, especially in its clergy, as witnessed in the mandate for clerical celibacy. Feminism’s rebuttal to a traditional Christian doctrine of dualism has been one of reclamation and celebration of the body: recognizing the necessity and the value of embodied knowledge. But as we reclaim the body as essential, does celibacy have a place in such a context? Is celibacy a valid expression of sexuality in a post-dualistic context or should it be abandoned? The shadow of dualism looms large on issues of sexuality in the church, but feminism’s critique, Neo-Paganism’s reflections and our own self-appreciation, can serve to inform our discipleship.

The classical concept of dualism can be traced back to Plato’s Phaedo, in which Plato describes the nature of the soul imprisoned within the body, striving to be released to

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<sup>25</sup> Mark 8:34, non-gendered pronouns mine.

<sup>26</sup> For the sake of clarity I will be speaking of dualism as the polarization of mind/soul over body. While I recognize that the mind and the soul are different conceptual entities, either is pitted, in a dualistic battle, against the body, leaving the body in the inferior position.

the realms of the Forms.<sup>27</sup> Following Plato's philosophical lineage, Aristotle's approach to dualism explained the union between soul and body yet elevated the position of the intellect, although part of the soul, as the receiver of all forms. As pre-Christian and Christian writers appropriated and reinterpreted dualism, the soul was emphasized as primary to the inferior body. The letters of Paul<sup>28</sup> in our New Testament canon stand witness to the valuation of soul over body, going so far as to denigrate outright the function of the flesh. For example, the writings of Paul and those in the Pauline school describe the conflict between the Jews, whose demarcation of faith (circumcision) emphasized the connection between faith and the body and the followers of Jesus, who believed that circumcision was an unnecessary step to walk the road of faith. Circumcision was a prerequisite for followers of Judaism, but this new sect of Christians, tutored by Paul, eliminated the ritual thereby discounting the importance of a physical response to faith. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.<sup>29</sup>

With the ritual of circumcision removed from the requirements of faithful adherence, the physical expression of faith was denigrated. Spiritual disciplines that include a physical element such as prayer, meditation, and fasting have remained central to

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<sup>27</sup> [The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism), s.v. "Dualism," by Howard Robinson; Fall 2003 ed. Accessed 31 Mar. 2007; available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism>.

<sup>28</sup> I recognize there are seven authenticated letters of Paul in the NT canon. The others are attributed to Paul, his followers or other authors writing in the name of Paul.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 8: 3-4.

Christian practice, but these were (and are) considered *pathways* to connect with God, not as a requirement to denote one's entry into the community.

Another example of Christian theism's bent toward dualism can be seen in the doctrine of the Incarnation as understood in the writings of Paul. The Pauline interpretation of the dual nature posits Christ as divine, possessing the Divine Soul. He is also human: God in corporeal form. Embedded within the doctrine of Christ's dual nature is the hierarchical dualism of mind/soul over body: Christ's immortal soul within the confines of his mortal body. In an echo of Platonic dualism, theism explains that upon his death, the divine soul of Christ is released from the bondage of the human flesh. His body is defeated and his soul is resurrected into new life; the body is weak in its mortality, but the superior soul has access to eternal life.

In describing this dualism in Jesus Christ, Paul extends this doctrine to all humanity, explaining the change that occurs upon death. Our earthly bodies are not adequate for heavenly life, therefore we must change. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable...For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.<sup>30</sup>

Only when we are changed, from perishable human form into a form that is worthy of the soul, can we achieve the immortality that Christ offers. In transformation from earthly to heavenly we will achieve another level of existence, but the implication is that our own bodies are not good enough for heaven, not good enough for God.

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:50, 53.

Paul's letters, both the authentic letters of Paul and those attributed to Paul, also contain textual passages that, instead of being the contextual instructions for a particular community with particular challenges, have been used as a tool for patriarchal justifications of dualistic hierarchy. For example, Ephesians 5:22-23 notes:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.<sup>31</sup>

In such instructional texts, dualism couches the wife/husband relationship in hierarchy, identifying the husband with both the head and Christ and the wife with the church and the body. The body is identified as the thing to be dominated, as is the wife. In this way, the philosophical idea of dualism becomes a catalyst for both systemic patriarchy and misogyny. Scripture, appropriated by the patriarchal institution of the Church, has been used as a *club* to control women in marital relationships and in societal roles. However, there is no one scriptural message regarding the “appropriate” role of the women, for the internal contradiction that exists within scriptural texts breeds not clarity, but confusion. For every Colossians 3:18<sup>32</sup> there is a countering Galatians 3:28.<sup>33</sup> For every 1 Timothy 2:15 extolling women’s childbearing abilities as her salvation,<sup>34</sup> there is a Luke 11:27-28 countering that claim with a valuation of “hearing the word of God and obeying it.”<sup>35</sup> In fact, an acceptance of patriarchy and misogyny seems to directly contradict the intent of Jesus. In her book Body, Sex and Pleasure, Christian Ethicist Christine Gudorf states,

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<sup>31</sup> Ephesians 5:22-23.

<sup>32</sup> “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”

<sup>33</sup> “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

<sup>34</sup> “Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

<sup>35</sup> “While he was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” But he said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!”

“Traditional acceptance of patriarchy and misogyny in the churches undermines both Jesus’ insistence on a discipleship of service, not domination, as well as his parables and example establishing radical inclusivity as the symbol of the reign of God.”<sup>36</sup> In the parables, Jesus presents women, not in societal roles of subservience, rather as the protagonists of the lessons, so much so that he proposes female characteristics to explain the nature of God. For example, Jesus images God as a woman who has lost one of her ten coins, and asks those listening, would she not “light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”<sup>37</sup> This, Jesus infers, is how God rejoices when one of God’s lost is found. Furthermore, the ministry of Jesus and the Jesus movement after his death was comprised of several prominent women who served alongside his male disciples,<sup>38</sup> proved their loyalty to Jesus as he hung on the cross,<sup>39</sup> taught Jesus a lesson,<sup>40</sup> or witnessed to his divine nature.<sup>41</sup> To extract from scripture a concise and clear message regarding dualism is impossible, for in the ministry and teachings of Jesus we understand male and female relationships to be equal, or at least relationships that honor the women’s place in the movement. These examples contradict the so-called household codes used to subordinate women in traditional Christian doctrines.

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<sup>36</sup> Christine Gudorf, Body, Sex, and Pleasure (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 15:8-9.

<sup>38</sup> For example, in Luke 8:1-3 the author notes several women traveling with Jesus and the twelve disciples including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza and Susanna and “many others” who provided for them out of their own resources.

<sup>39</sup> In Matthew 27:55-56 the following women are named at the site of the cross: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Joses and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

<sup>40</sup> In the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Mark 7: 24-30, Jesus begins believing he is restricted only to the Jews and leaves the encounter with a new perspective on his mission to include the Gentiles as well.

<sup>41</sup> In John 4:7-29, Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well, and when he reveals his nature to the woman, she witnesses to others in the town, and John tells us in verse 39, “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.”

This understanding of the “sinful” flesh, encouraged by the writings of Paul, those attributed to Paul, influenced the followers of Jesus to adopt behaviors in reaction to their understanding of dualism. These behaviors became spiritual practices, physical expressions of personal faith, and celibacy was one form of this type of spiritual practice. To say celibacy developed as a *result* of dualism would be inaccurate. But celibacy mandated by an authoritative Church structure *thrived* in the context of dualism, and vice versa.

Celibacy as a practice for clergy was illuminated by early Christian theologians as a way to control the desires that may distract one from God. Augustine, born in North Africa in the fourth century CE, was an influential theologian who shaped Christianity’s ideas about celibacy and consequently the theology of the flesh. Early in his adult life, being devoutly religious, he dedicated himself to Manicheanism, a Christian sect later regarded as heretical.<sup>42</sup> But there was a problem to his achieving a place in the elect, the highest level of the sect: celibacy. Augustine was tormented by lust, and in open opposition to the elect of the Manichean sect, he lived with his concubine and his son. After a painful breakup, he took another concubine. “I was simply a slave to lust.” He wrote in his Confessions, “So I took another woman, not of course as a wife; and thus my soul’s disease was nourished and kept alive as vigorously as ever, indeed worse than ever...”<sup>43</sup> His soul’s disease, his bodily desire for sexual connection, plagued him for many years, until his conversion to Christianity and his renunciation of sex forever. As a new convert, Augustine became passionate about celibacy, as passionate as he had been about sex years earlier. He detailed his ideas about sex and celibacy in his various books, notably asserting that sexual

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<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Abbott, A History of Celibacy (New York: Scribner, 1999), 64.

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, The Confessions of Saint Augustine (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944), 99.

intercourse was evil if it was corrupted by desire.<sup>44</sup> However, marital sex had its place in reproductive activity, although it should be approached with a “certain sadness” acknowledging one’s necessary participation in the evil act of intercourse.<sup>45</sup> Adherence to the will of God was always central to Augustine, and as sex had the propensity to be evil, God’s will was that we refrain from it to the best of our ability.

During the late medieval period, some Neoplatonic and Augustinian ideas fused with an Aristotelian foundation in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Immersed in the philosophical framework of dualism, Aquinas’ understanding of the body worked in relationship to his understanding of God. In his Summa Contra Gentiles, Aquinas explains,

Again, as man’s mind is subordinated to God, so is the body subordinated to the soul, and the lower powers to reason.... Now, virtue consists in this: that both the inner feelings and the use of corporeal things be regulated by reason.<sup>46</sup>

Reason, the action of the intellect, governs the realm of both the corporeal and the emotional. In this system, Aquinas identifies the mind as the rightful ruler of both soul and body. Inherent within such thought is the built-in dualistic hierarchy: we are inferior to God as the body is inferior to the mind. Aquinas, presumably a lifelong celibate, became one of the central figures in Roman Catholic ethics and shaped Catholic doctrines regarding sex, marriage and celibacy.<sup>47</sup>

How does this dualism, this understanding of the inferiority of the body, translate into Church doctrine? Dualism reinforces the inequitable relationship: man/woman, good/evil, mind/body, soul/body. For each quality or subject we revere, there must be its

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<sup>44</sup> Abbott, 66.

<sup>45</sup> Abbott, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book 3, pt. 2: Providence (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 141-42.

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 178-79.

opposite to despise. For every angel there must be a demon, for every positive there must be a negative: such is the nature of dualism. With dualism as a philosophical foundation, both scriptural texts and Christian tradition participated in a pattern that labeled both the good (mind/soul, reason, God, man) and the evil (body, emotions/passions, Satan, woman.) Therefore, if we understand the body to be evil, or to contribute to evil, then we as a church community will elect to legislate the sexuality and sexual practices of clergy. If one cannot control one's own body, the Church was more than happy to step in with some legislation to punish transgressors.

Control was not the only reason for celibacy. In fact, control was probably an unspoken underlying factor in its practice. Celibacy has been continually used as a spiritual discipline for the purposes of connecting with God. In early Christianity, for instance, Celibacy offered women a particularly unique opportunity for independence in a socially-repressive context. By adopting a celibate life as a monastic or a nun, suddenly a woman was free from arranged marriage, childbirth, motherhood and domestic life. In celibate community, a woman had the chance for an education, for intellectual discourse, for travel, all in a vocation serving others as the bride of Christ himself. A woman in a monastic community, like her male counterparts, lived a life of service to Christ and to the world, relatively free from societal restrictions on gender and class expectations. For example, as author Rosemary Radford Ruether notes in her book Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family,

In Britain, Ireland and Germany in the sixth to tenth centuries, these [female celibates] were generally noblewomen, some in search of refuge from violence or forced marriage, though the convent might also be open

to lower-class women, often former servants associated with the foundress.<sup>48</sup>

One fourth-century female celibate of Early Christianity serves as an example of the way celibacy offered women unique power. Melania the Younger “wore her celibacy like armor against danger.”<sup>49</sup> After convincing her husband to join her in a commitment to lifelong celibacy, she persuaded him to live separately, thereby shifting the power in their marital relationship. She gathered together a community of like-minded women and together they traveled extensively. Melania performed several miracles along the way, including the rescue of a woman who was in the care of a butchering surgeon that attempted to cut a dead fetus from her womb.<sup>50</sup> For Melania and her virgins “celibacy was a liberating lifestyle. It exempted them from womanly tedium and toil and granted them excitement, freedom to travel wherever they wished, the luxury of scholarship and debate and a secure, simple life among women who celebrated each other’s friendship.”<sup>51</sup>

Liberation was available to women through celibacy. In fact the freedom available to those women in celibate communities was so liberating that when the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe, nuns found themselves suddenly without vocation, home and identity. No longer would a nun or a female monastic have access to education or independence that monastic life offered, for she was expected to marry and take on the role of a Christian woman: wife and mother. Some nuns refused to leave their communities, but this was met with confrontation. In some cases female monastics and nuns were harassed by mobs, some were forced to hear reforming sermons, some were denied clerical presence

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<sup>48</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 56.

<sup>49</sup> Abbott, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Abbott, 96.

<sup>51</sup> Abbott, 97.

and attention for mass and confession, and some were dragged from their convents by their families.<sup>52</sup> The liberation gained by celibate life was suddenly lost to a system that supposedly liberated clergy from the “bonds” of celibacy. As many Protestant male clergy celebrated the freedom to be ministers *and* husbands, female nuns and monastic celibates, after experiencing the liberating freedom of education, travel and independent living, became relegated solely to the domestic sphere.

In response to systems that have demonized the body, feminism has worked to recover a healthy view of the flesh, especially in regard to sexuality. Traditional Christian views of the “Fall” have condemned both women and sexuality and so in feminism’s attempt to highlight the value of both, dualism was renounced as an unnecessary construct of male domination. The body has its own value and is not subordinate to the mind. As feminist author Carol Christ noted,

Our bodies are not flawed homes for our rational souls, nor is the flesh a “corruption” of a “more perfect” nature. To the contrary, our bodies are ourselves, our mode of being in the world.<sup>53</sup>

Our minds and souls are embodied. There is no disembodied mind, no body-less soul. We are creatures that exist in the flesh and thus our bodies cannot be separated from the actions of our minds or souls. The knowledge gained through our senses is just as valid as knowledge gained by reason. In a feminist post-dualistic context, all knowledge is created equal: no longer is Reason preeminent in the acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge gained through the senses, by experiential interaction with the natural world has a place in a post-dualistic context. According to feminist Christian ethicist Beverly Harrison, “All knowledge is rooted in our sensuality... Feeling is the basic bodily ingredient that mediates

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<sup>52</sup> Ruether, 70.

<sup>53</sup> Carol P. Christ, Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997. Reprint. New York: Routledge, 2004), 144.

our connectedness to the world... If feeling is damaged or cut off, our power to image the world and to act in it is destroyed.”<sup>54</sup> But experience of the external world is only one way of “feeling.” Knowledge gained through the experience of *emotion* also has value. Passion, grief, joy, and anger: these emotions help us to engage with one another and with the world, and those experiences of engagement can offer us a kind of knowledge unique to humankind. Carol Christ explains Audre Lorde’s definition of “the erotic” as the power that can awaken us from the numbness of alienation from our bodies.<sup>55</sup> This we can experience through sexual expression as well as in any ‘physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual exchange.’ Lorde explains, “For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation.”<sup>56</sup>

Neo-Paganism, the recent renaissance of ancient pagan practices of spirituality, ritual and metaphysics, rejects the dualism of tradition and embraces the body and sexuality as sacred.<sup>57</sup> Starhawk, whose pivotal book The Spiral Dance is attributed to have launched the rebirth of the Goddess-movement in America, explains sexuality’s role in the experience of life.

Sexuality, as a direct expression of the life force, is seen as numinous and sacred. It can be expressed freely, so long as the guiding principle is love. Marriage is a deep commitment, a magical, spiritual and psychic bond. But it is only one possibility out of many for loving, sexual expression.<sup>58</sup>

Sexuality is sacred. One’s identity as a sexual being is essential and the expression of that identity is to be valued. Unlike traditional Christianity, Neo-Paganism honors all sexual

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<sup>54</sup> Christ, 145.

<sup>55</sup> Christ, 147.

<sup>56</sup> Christ, 147.

<sup>57</sup> I use the term Neo-Paganism referring to goddess-worship, wicca, witchcraft, and contemporary paganism of the Western world.

<sup>58</sup> Starhawk, The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 37.

expression, inside and outside the bonds of marriage. Reacting to dualism and its potential harm, Starhawk encourages her readers to reject systems that further the split of the flesh and the spirit. These include asceticism (which would essentially include celibacy), hierarchies that encourage an unequal power structure, and the confining of sex to marriage or reproduction.<sup>59</sup> Sexuality, and the expression thereof, is to be valued, not legislated and in Neo-Paganism and other forms of Goddess-worship, the repression of one's sexuality is to be admonished and rejected. How, in such a context, is celibacy viewed? Is there a place for celibacy in Neo-Paganism?

One acceptable form in Neo-Paganism is *temporary celibacy* – a resting period from sexual activity – which is seen as helpful, used on an occasional basis, to aid in a more fulfilling sexual life. The ‘pulling back’ from sexual contact with others may allow the individual a chance to turn inward to focus on oneself, to heal and nurture oneself with the energy he/she may usually give away to lovers.<sup>60</sup> Temporary celibacy may also provide an opportunity for later ecstatic ritual experience. Celibacy can be a way to store up energy for later release or to restrict it to a sacred context. Historically, chastity was “often used as an instrument to prepare for heated and passionate sexual union during fertility festivals and ritual orgies or similar celebrations.”<sup>61</sup> In this way celibacy is used as an instrument for a richer sexual experience in the context of a sacred ritual. Temporary celibacy also has value in the healing of oneself of past hurt, pain or abuse. Neo-Pagan author Raven Kaldera

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<sup>59</sup> Starhawk, Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 140.

<sup>60</sup> Jennifer Hunter, Rites of Pleasure: Sexuality in Wicca and NeoPaganism (New York: Citadel Press, 2004), 142.

<sup>61</sup> See Rufus C. Camphausen, Encyclopedia of Sacred Sexuality (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1999), 38, cited in Hunter, 143.

explained. "I think [celibacy] can be a very valid practice, especially for people who are trying to purge their sexuality of the detritus of collected issues."<sup>62</sup>

But some Neo-Pagans have a hard time finding anything redeeming about celibacy, viewing it as an unnatural state that is either imposed on others or a way for someone to deny him- or herself the basic necessities of life. Oberon Zell-Ravencroft, founder of the Neo-Pagan Church of All Worlds, explained the essential role sexuality plays in spirituality.

There are five elements: earth, water, air, fire and spirit. We are composed of all of these, and we need to take them all in to fully live. We take in earth via the food we eat. We take in water via the liquids we drink. We take in air via the air we breathe. We take in fire via the heat we must absorb from the sun, fires, etcetera. And we take in spirit through sex. We can live a few minutes without air, we can live a short time without heat, we can go a few days without water, and we can last over a month without food. It's possible, I understand, to live an entire lifetime without sex. But why would anyone want to? All I can see is that it leaves one spiritless.<sup>63</sup>

And even as Jennifer Hunter included a section on celibacy in her book Rites of Pleasure: Sexuality in Wicca and Neo-Paganism, the issue is not given the in-depth exploration of other topics. While celibacy receives three pages worth of discussion, Sex Work and Prostitution, for example, is covered by a whole chapter. In fact, the three pages are sandwiched between the section on Drag and Transgender and the chapter on BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadism/masochism.) Celibacy is a part of the "alternative" lifestyles section, a life choice that is to be accepted in Neo-Paganism, but one with a stigma attached. This assumption is confirmed by the book's dedication. Hunter offered the book, "To all the people who are having their very first orgasms right now."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Hunter, 143.

<sup>63</sup> Hunter, 145.

<sup>64</sup> Hunter, dedication page.

We are bodies, each of us, but our theological history provides a theology of shame of our flesh. The dualism used to justify a doctrine of shame is a human construct, for there is no disembodied mind/soul. Our bodies play an essential role in our processes of thought. “There is no Cartesian dualistic person,” explained Lakoff and Johnson, “with a mind separate from and independent of the body... the mind inherently embodied, reason is shaped by the body.”<sup>65</sup> The assumption, foundational to Western philosophy, that mind/soul and body are distinct entities must be questioned, especially in light of changing attitudes of sexuality and the results of cognitive and neurological science. As we’ve moved beyond dualism, have we also moved beyond celibacy or can there be a post-dualistic theology of embodied celibacy?

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<sup>65</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 5.

## CHAPTER 4

### A NEW CELIBACY: A CHOICE FOR WHOLE LOVE

I myself am a celibate. Called to ministry and called to singleness, I chose this life outside the cultural norm. How, in our sexually-permissive culture, can I choose celibacy? The old reasons for celibacy simply do not hold up under scrutiny: I don't accept mind/body dualism; I don't view the body, and the desires and passions embodiment inspires, as evil; I don't believe in making decisions about my sexuality under the pressure of a patriarchal institution. And yet, I am a celibate. In order to consider celibacy as a valid lifestyle, I must reframe it for myself.

However, before I reframe celibacy for myself or for anyone, I must recognize my position in dialogue with the extremes of our current church climate. I am proposing a position of celibacy that opens up the discussion of sexuality in the church, which may prove threatening to those who would like to keep that door closed. I am also proposing a significant role for celibacy in sexual expression, which may prove challenging to those fighting for sexual freedom and may see celibacy as a step backward. As James Nelson explained in his book, Embodiment,

On the one side, some are highly suspicious that 'sexual fulfillment' is simply a euphemism for hedonism and sexual license. On the other side are those who have felt condemned by the church for being sexual persons and who suspect that its lofty language is being used to deprive them of their human fullness.<sup>1</sup>

Why is it necessary to redefine celibacy for our context? The classical justification for celibacy, which is based on a philosophical foundation of dualism and the

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<sup>1</sup> James B. Nelson, Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 14.

understanding of the body as evil, does not address a post-modern attitude about the body. Humanity is embodied spirit. Spirit and flesh are not essentially separate entities. Therefore, my relationship with celibacy must change, because the damaged foundation upon which celibacy was built has been exposed. My critique of the foundation of the classical philosophical premise of dualism and the subsequent assumptions that led to mandated clerical celibacy in no way leads me to call for the destruction of the tradition of celibacy. I critique the tradition hoping to transform the tradition, not hoping for its destruction. In her book She Who Is, feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson stated, “I find it coming home to roost in the attempt to see that whatever is true and holy in classical theology may also reflect a ray of divine light.”<sup>2</sup> The goal of this effort is transformation into a new community; that we might be able to see beyond the differences of sexual expression and into our common desire for wholeness.

If we are to reject foundational dualism and also attempt to retain celibacy as a practice, we must develop some parameters around which a new embodied theology of celibacy can be built. If this new theology is to be based in feminist theology, we need to state up front the methods used in a feminist theological effort. Johnson identified these as follows:

Drawing energy and light from this social experience, feminist theology engages in at least three interrelated tasks: it critically utilizes inherited oppositions, searches for alternative wisdom and suppressed history and risks new interpretations of the tradition in conversation with women’s lives.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, 29.

As we move into the theological and ethical framework, we must not lose sight of our practical experience. What good is theology or ethics if it does not apply to our everyday lives? Let us begin to rethink celibacy in such a light.

### **ASSERTION ONE: POST-DUALISM**

“Which commandment is the first?” the teacher asks Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, and he explains the first and greatest commandment. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”<sup>4</sup> He then adds the second, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Complete love of God and neighbor, love that develops from and is expressed by one’s whole self; this is the model Christ offers, both to the teacher of the law in the scriptural text and to us, the contemporary readers of the text today. Jesus’ model values heart, soul, mind and body and honors the place of each in the expression of faith, countering the philosophical idea of dualism. In a dualistic framework, the mind/soul is superior to the body, and reason superior to feeling, emotions and human experience. What does it mean to be human? Reason, the function of the mind, is highly valued and all other methods by which we gain knowledge are relegated to supporting roles. But the model Jesus offers us is one that considers other modes of human activity equally. If we love God with our whole heart, we utilize our emotions: our compassion, our ability to nurture and care for others in the way that God cares for us. If we love God with our whole soul, we utilize our understanding of the spiritual: taking our sense of what it means to be “holy” and putting that to work in the world. If we love God with our whole strength, we utilize our bodies: to use our physical selves to experience the world

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 12:28-31.

and all that is in it. These three elements, along with the use of human intellect, comprise an expression of love that emphasizes *wholeness*. Philosophical dualism has historically emphasized Reason, thereby encouraging the devaluation of the other three aspects of the human condition. The body has especially suffered, but Jesus tells us that all aspects of humanity have a place in the love of God: emotions, spirituality, intellect and physicality all play a part in a whole-person faith.

Western Philosophy depends to an extent on the concept of the disembodied mind, but cognitive science has revealed that the mind is inherently embodied, that thought is mostly unconscious, and that abstract concepts are largely metaphorical.<sup>5</sup> “The mind” is a metaphorical concept referring to the activity of the brain. All activity of “the mind” can be attributed to the physical function of the brain, and the brain essentially exists within the body. Therefore, Reason – a function of the brain - is not disembodied. Any process involving the mind inherently involves the body, as mind exists within the body. Therefore any separation of mind and body, any dualistic reference to either, is inaccurate.

Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move, and manipulate, and the detailed structures of our brains, which have been shaped by both evolution and experience.<sup>6</sup>

If we take this dualistic concept of the disembodied mind and then image God as the epitome of all that exemplifies Reason and the highest function of mind, we emerge from the exercise with a doctrine of God as the Divine Mind. In this manifestation, God thinks and things happen: the world is created, storms rage, wars are won and lost.

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<sup>5</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, 17.

Divine thought is the Cause, the Source of divine action. And as David Hume stated in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,

[There is] nothing more repugnant to common experience, than mind without body; a mere spiritual substance, which fell not under their senses nor comprehension, and of which they had not observed one single instance throughout all nature.<sup>7</sup>

Mind and body necessarily work together in the human form. The function of the brain is determined by and is interpreted by the body and in our physical selves we have the ability to manifest the actions and ideas of our brains. Add this functionality to the idea in cognitive science that most of our human thought is unconscious,<sup>8</sup> and the valuation of the mind as superior to the body seems ridiculous. Mind and body, brain and its fleshly encasing, work together in the human individual. But what, if not Reason alone, is the epitome of humanity? To what shall we strive to acquire?

Jesus' explanation to the teacher in the gospel of Mark correctly identifies the various aspects of the human condition. These aspects are identified linguistically by the use of metaphor. For example, our emotional capacity is captured by the metaphor of *the heart*.<sup>9</sup> Matters of *the heart* include passion, grief, joy, fear, anger and all other emotional responses in our human experience. Our capacity to believe in and to experience something beyond ourselves is identified by use of the metaphor *the soul* or *the spirit*. By the use of *the soul*, we are able to see the holy in objects, in experiences,

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<sup>7</sup> David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 81.

<sup>8</sup> Lakoff and Johnson identify several activities of the Mind to be classified as a result of the Cognitive Unconscious, including all mental operations concerned with conceptual systems, meaning, inference and language. (Lakoff and Johnson, 12)

<sup>9</sup> The use of the metaphor language is influenced by my reading of Lakoff and Johnson, and helps me to understand how, for example, the body can exist as both an idea and an actuality. We do indeed have a heart, that functions as a vital organ within our body, but the ability to love and care and nurture and show compassion is not a function of that particular organ, it is the function of the whole-self. Thus we use the heart metaphor to describe the parts of us that contribute to those identified actions.

in people and in the natural world. Our capacity to think, to analyze and to reason is identified by the metaphor *the mind*. When we explain the activities of the mind, we speak in language that distinguishes the conscious from the unconscious brain function and label the conscious action the activity of *the mind*. This would essentially include decision-making, deciphering, problem-solving and the like, but involuntary action like breathing, blinking or swallowing would not be included in the function of *the mind*. Our capacity to experience the natural world is identified by the metaphor *the body* or *the flesh*. In a system of dualism the body, including our sensory perceptions of the natural world and our fleshly impulses, has been pitted in opposition to the mind/soul. Consequently, *the body* is often identified, both in scriptural texts and in Christian tradition, as our downfall, as seen in the words of Jesus, “The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.”<sup>10</sup>

Each aspect, each capacity is unique and vital to human experience, but each part in and of itself is less than the total of their sum. Mind, soul, heart and body together create the whole-self and wholeness. The integration of all disparate aspects of self, is the ultimate goal of human life. We each need to weave together our ability to reason, to love, to experience the natural world and to see within it the holy. Similarly, we need to integrate all the extraneous parts of ourselves to become the whole person God intends for us to be. “We all need to get it together,” wrote author A. W. Richard Sipe, “to piece together our relationships, our life and our loves out of the raw, base

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 14:38. Some commentators think the Greek word *sarx*, translated as “flesh,” is not synonymous with *soma*, the word for “body.” *Sarx* is translated as “flesh,” the physical material of the body. *Soma* is understood as the whole body, the living body, the whole person. The author of Mark used in this verse *sarx*, meaning the physical material of the body, the flesh.

material of our existence and our experience.”<sup>11</sup> *Integration* is the goal, for as we develop into whole-selves we can wholly relate to others and to God.

The theologies of Martin Buber and Schubert Ogden both emphasize the human ability to relate one to another. “To exist as a self, as each of us does, is always to be related,” Ogden wrote, “first of all, to the intimate world constituted by one’s own body.”<sup>12</sup> Once we are integrated, if indeed there is an end to this process, the distinctive elements of heart, soul, mind and body are not lost: they are forever in relationship with one another in the creation of the whole. In this way, we maintain our particularity while achieving wholeness.

Accordingly, the “perfect relationship” according to theologian Martin Buber, leaves nothing out, leaves nothing behind. This essentially necessitates one’s maintenance of oneself. For example, in a relationship with a you, an other beyond oneself (whether a human you, an animal you, or the eternal You) one must maintain one’s I-ness, one’s wholeness of self. In this way Buber’s work accentuates the importance of each individual in the relationship. One’s wholeness must be maintained in order to relate to another’s wholeness. Therefore, in a relationship with the Eternal You, God, the individual has an important, in fact *a vital* role, to play. It’s not all about God. Humanity has value. Buber explained, “We pray ‘Let Your will be done...’ and what is implied is ‘...through me whom you need.’”<sup>13</sup> While I agree with Buber and Ogden about the import of relation in understanding our place in the world, before

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<sup>11</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 157.

<sup>12</sup> Schubert M. Ogden, The Reality of God and Other Essays (New York: Harper & Row, 1966. Reprint. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Buber, Walther Kaufmann, trans., I and Thou (New York: Scribner, 1970. Reprint. New York: Touchstone, 1996), 131.

relationship with another *self* can be facilitated, one must integrate one's own disparate factions to become a whole-self.

Does this mean that the ultimate human experience is perfection: full capacity of mind, soul, heart and body? Not at all. The goal is not perfection, but *wholeness*, and in each individual this wholeness will look differently. Each individual is blessed with different abilities and each individual faces different challenges. In each case, the possibility of wholeness exists. There is an allowance for imperfection, for brokenness, for limitations and in that allowance, there exists a possibility for growth, development and progress.

In this post-dualistic worldview, all knowledge and means of acquiring knowledge are created equal. Acquisition of whole knowledge is information gained by *the mind, the soul, the heart and the body*. Knowledge acquired by the heart is emotional knowledge, the data collected by using our emotional capacity. Knowledge acquired by the soul includes the imagination, intuition, and artistic expression. Knowledge acquired by the mind includes our ability to reason, to analyze, to use our intellectual capacity. Knowledge acquired by our body is experiential knowledge, data collected from our senses. Whole knowledge incorporates all elements: emotional knowledge, sensory data and soulful imagination combined with analysis. The ideal human condition is a mature integration, our ability to act and react in the world using knowledge acquired by our mind, soul, heart and body. Therefore the consequence of our “immaturity” is that we act and react in the world *without* using all the available knowledge of our whole-selves: We react by emotion in a passionate outburst; we react coldly and analytically by using reason alone; we react or make decisions with only

information of our senses, or we react completely spiritually, discounting the information gathered by our reason, our emotions and our physicality.

For example, as I am walking down the street one evening at dusk, I am confronted with a man who asks me for ten dollars. If I use only the knowledge gained by the use of *my body*, I may smell the strong stench of urine mixed with the pungent order of whiskey, and I may conclude that I should give the man the money just to remove him from my personal space. If I use solely the information gathered by *my heart*, he may remind me of a painful memory of my father who was a panhandler and I may react to him in response to that anger or fear or grief. If I use the data collected by my mind, I may discern, “Based on his tattered appearance and the smell, I understand that this man is less fortunate than I am. But If I give him ten dollars, he may use it to buy booze or cigarettes. Do I want my money to be used in that way?” If I use the capacity of my soul, I may give the man ten dollars just because Jesus said “love thy neighbor” and, moved to compassion or moved by guilt, I forsake reason, sensory information and emotional intelligence to make the decision. In each scenario, I am reacting to the situation before me. How will I use the information gathered? My heart reminds me of my history with the homeless. My mind identifies the challenges of this man and the problems of making a decision to help or not to help. My soul tells me to imitate the actions of Jesus, to respond to the needs of others based on a belief in God. And my body finds the physical elements: I smell the stink of urine, and ask myself “What does that mean? This man may have some medical issue, or no access to private toilets or showers.” Whole-knowledge takes into account all the ways of acquiring knowledge in order to form a response.

Once whole-knowledge is synthesized, one must develop an action in order to respond to a given situation. In the scenario with the homeless man, I weigh the possible responses and decide to give the man ten dollars, realizing the man may use it to buy alcohol. I give the man ten dollars, as a response to Jesus' command to "love thy neighbor." I give the man ten dollars because, moved by compassion, I am able to see myself in his place if my circumstances were different. I give the man ten dollars, discerning that the smell of urine indicates a medical issue or a level of poverty that is beyond the gift of ten dollars, but one that demonstrates a person in need of help. Whole-knowledge leads to a response using the mind, soul, heart and body.

In his book of essays entitled The Reality of God, Schubert Ogden examined the influence of Martin Heidegger on theological thinking as well as the influence of theological thinking on Heidegger. Ogden explained Heidegger's question of the validity of the theological method called *via negationis* (the way of negation) and *via eminentiae* (the way of eminence).<sup>14</sup> The way of negation takes the characteristics of humanity and compares them with the characteristics of God. In doing this, the *via negationis* method sees humanity in one light and posits God as the opposite. "Humanity is greedy." We might say, "God is not." The way of eminence, the method I will use in this doctrine of God, also takes the qualities of humanity and compares them with the qualities of God, but the conclusions differ. The *via eminentiae* method sees humanity in one light, but God as the epitome of that quality. For example, if humanity is working for wholeness, then God is the Ultimate Whole.

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<sup>14</sup> Ogden, 157.

This doctrine of God as the Ultimate Whole recognizes the unity in the character of God. In the Ultimate Whole, there are no warring factions, no good side and bad side, no separation of Divine Mind and Divine Body, for as Jesus says, “Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”<sup>15</sup> There are no disparate aspects for there is ultimate unity in God. Therefore God, who has ultimate integration, is able to relate wholly to each individual S/He encounters. God as the Ultimate Whole has a unique ability to be wholly present to each creature. In this way, God includes all and is included by all creatures. In this non-dual world God is “That which has no opposite; he is One-without-a-second... In a peculiar and profound sense God is all-inclusive; there is nothing ‘outside’ him, for had he any ‘outside’ he would have limitations and would not be infinite.”<sup>16</sup> These categories and opposites simply do not exist without duality; therefore there is no separation between God and the world. There is no inside and outside. There are no boundaries to the activity of God. And just as the integrated self is not vanquished when it enters into relationship with another, the particular creatures are not vanquished in a relationship with God. Panentheist Alan Watts explained,

Individual things are not obliterated in the unity of God but transfigured, seen as more perfectly and uniquely themselves. For if the unity of God is truly all-inclusive and non-dual, it must include diversity and distinction as well as one-ness.<sup>17</sup>

God as the Ultimate Whole relates to all, includes all and provides an example of unity and wholeness to which we can aspire in our relationship with God and with others.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark 12:29.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Watts, Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion (New York: Pantheon Books, Inc., 1971), 144-46; cited in Charles Hartshorne and William Reese, Philosophers Speak of God (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 327.

<sup>17</sup> Hartshorne and Reese, 327.

But, according to Buber, human unity especially in sexual encounter is not equitable to the relationship that is possible with the Eternal You. Humans in the midst of sexual unity, said Buber, “serve as a metaphor who in the passion of erotic fulfillment are so carried away by the miracles of the embrace that all knowledge of I and You drowns in the feeling of a unity that neither exists nor can exist.”<sup>18</sup> The unity of two you’s (two humans in relationship), while admirable, provides a crude metaphor for the unity possible with the Eternal You, the Ultimate Whole, the Most Integrated Divine Mind-Soul-Heart-Body, the Lord who is One.

If we accept God as a model of Integration, we essentially accept that the wholeness of God includes a body. This leads us to question if God has a body, where is S/He?<sup>19</sup> Why is God seemingly absent? We are witness to the work of God, to the effects of God in the world, to the results of past work and we can anticipate work to come, but a physical presence of God’s body seems non-existent.

As we believe in God, we must accept that there are aspects of God and ways that God works that are invisible to our eyes. To believe in God is to believe in existence(s) in which we do not participate. There is no dualistic spiritual realm pitted against the material realm. Rather we use the term the “spiritual realm” as a metaphor for any existence beyond those in which we participate. And there are *many* realities in which we do not participate. For example, we can not possibly exist in the realities of two different contexts simultaneously. We cannot exist in both Los Angeles and Paris simultaneously. We do not exist in every reality. And yet, we have the ability to be

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<sup>18</sup> Buber, 135.

<sup>19</sup> Feminist Sallie McFague identifies *the earth* as a model of the body of God. See The Body of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), in which McFague discusses the ecological crisis and compares it to the destructive forces humanity has perpetrated on the body.

present in other ways in other realities. Through the use of our Imagination, we can be present in Los Angeles and Paris simultaneously. Through the use of our memory, we can be present in Los Angeles and be present in a memory of a Parisian vacation. Through the use of Projection, we can be present in Los Angeles and can be projected into Paris by a story, a film, or a piece of art. We can participate in other realities by use of our imagination, memory and/or projection, but we cannot be *physically* present in simultaneous realities. God, however, participates in all realities. As Creator of all, God participates intimately – Whole-Self to whole-self - with all creatures. Therefore, God is not *absent* from us, but more present, ever-present, not only in our reality, but in others as well. God, too, writes Ogden, “is an experiencing self who anticipates the future and remembers the past and whose successive occasions of present experience are themselves temporal occurrences.”<sup>20</sup>

We, as human beings, can honor our experiences of the physical while understanding there are some realities in which we cannot participate, things that we cannot experience. Not that we never will, but in our present form, in our present reality we are unable to connect whole-self to whole-self in every circumstance with every creature. We are confined by our own temporality and our own context.

We are finite beings, dependent of temporal limits of earthly existence. If we are to construct a doctrine of God using the via negationis method, we would consider our finitude, our temporal limitations noted by the cycle of birth and death, and develop a doctrine of God that negates an existence that begins and ends in such a way. God, therefore, must be infinite. God does not experience death as we do, for then there

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<sup>20</sup> Ogden, 152.

would be no God, and that is inconceivable. In contrast, a doctrine that emerges from the *via eminentiae* method does not shy away from God's temporality, rather temporality is embraced and pushed to its limit. God's existence is not the absence of finitude, but finitude in its fullness. God is alive to all creatures, experiencing all that we experience: birth and death, again and again, as each creature comes into our reality and exits. God not only exists in our time, but in all time, to all creatures. Ogden, explaining Heidegger's views, encouraged us to consider God's eternity is construed not simply as temporality, but as a temporality that is "infinite."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, God's existence is not merely timelessness, rather an infinite fullness of time.<sup>22</sup> God exists not in an other-worldly non-temporal form, but in the fullness of temporality, available to all creatures at all times. In this way, God's relationship with the world is not removed, but intimate and direct. "Because his love, unlike ours, is pure and unbounded, his relation to his creatures and theirs to him is direct and immediate."<sup>23</sup> Ogden explained God's relationship with those S/He has created is similar to our relationship with our own body. As our brain sends impulses, our body reacts almost immediately. This, Ogden stated, is analogous to the relationship between God and God's creatures.

Christian theism explains this relationship between God and God's people through the Incarnation.<sup>24</sup> In the birth of Jesus Christ, we Christians understand that God appeared to us in our reality, in the flesh. The gospel of John explains, "And the

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<sup>21</sup> Ogden, 153. In a footnote, Ogden explains that Heidegger put the word infinite in quotes, clearly trying to convey only the vulgar concept of time, to refer to the "endless" continuum of nows that constitutes "within-timeness."

<sup>22</sup> Ogden, 154.

<sup>23</sup> Ogden, 177.

<sup>24</sup> The Pauline understanding of the Incarnation occupies a prominent place in the United Methodist liturgy for the service of Death and Resurrection, thereby influencing the understanding of those participating. Texts from Romans and 1 Corinthians display Paul's dualism of spirit and body. But the Incarnation of Christ can be understood in a holistic way, as explained in this chapter.

Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”<sup>25</sup> God becomes flesh, emerges from the womb a human being and lives a temporal existence and in doing so, he becomes an example of the glory of the unified mind/heart/soul/body. The Incarnation however also presents a quandary for the Church, and a Christian Tradition that, under the influence of dualism, has subjected the flesh to both scorn and restrictive legislation. By embracing the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, we also essentially embrace the idea that at some point in temporal earthly history, God had a body.

That we experience God's gracious justification or acceptance in and through Jesus Christ has profound sexual implications. ‘The Word became flesh.’ Jesus was a sexual being. And here is God's affirmation of our own sexuality.<sup>26</sup>

But in a tradition that has established a dualistic understanding of mind/soul and body, this is a problem. To consider Jesus, the Incarnation of God, with a body is problematic: does this mean Jesus experienced all the desires and passions of humanity? If Jesus is to be considered a *man* as the Nicene Creed states, this essentially includes the experiences of sexuality and to deny his sexuality is to deny his full humanity.<sup>27</sup> But, as Nelson stated, the Church *has* denied the sexuality of Jesus. “For the most part the church has presented Jesus as sexless. Because the human body is vitally and spontaneously sexual, [there are] many radical implications of the incarnation.”<sup>28</sup> Instead we image Jesus as the Divine Soul of God encased in a fleshly prison, and in his death he escapes his earthly prison and his soul is released to be with

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<sup>25</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson, Embodiment, 74.

<sup>27</sup> The Nicene Creed reads, “by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Accessed 7 Dec. 2005, online; available from <http://www.mit.edu/~tb/anglican/intro/1r-nicene-creed.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Nelson, Embodiment, 74.

the Father in Heaven, which is hauntingly similar to the Platonic and Aristotelian model of mind/soul and body dualism.

Jesus approached those he encountered as a whole person, in Buber's terminology the Eternal You, relating to each you with an integration of compassion, intellect, sensory knowledge and spirit. As his ministry developed, he preached the potential glory of humanity: The Kingdom of God. The Kingdom was not a place to visit, a land to be dominated, rather it referred to the fullness of human potential. Jesus described a Kingdom in which whole people beyond self-hatred, beyond dualism could wholly connect with one another – whole-self to whole-self. The poor would be cared for, the hungry would be made full, people would go out of their way for one another and humanity, in all its imperfection and particularity, would honor ourselves as God intended. And how do we find this Kingdom?

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."<sup>29</sup>

The kingdom, Jesus says, may be found by looking within: within our community, even within ourselves. We have the capacity to realize the kingdom with the resources that exist within us. What an affirmation of human incarnation!

As we grow and develop as whole persons, we are better able to relate to others – you to you – as unified minds/hearts/souls/bodies. We act and react utilizing all facets of our selves: our compassion, our intellect, our sensory information and our spirit. We care for ourselves and others as valued individuals because we recognize the "youness" in others. In doing so, we are able to respect the others we encounter and are able

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 17:21-22.

to understand and honor the choices they make. Wholeness fosters a new celibacy because, in our integrated state, we recognize the value in others, thereby honoring their freedom to choose. In addition, an integrated self has the ability to make decisions for oneself using whole knowledge, including information gained by the mind, heart, soul and body. Instead of making a decision for celibacy based on a dualistically-inspired hatred of the flesh, we accept our bodies as essential to our whole selves, embrace our particularity and make a whole-knowledge decision for celibacy as an expression of our sexuality.

Is celibacy an expression of sexuality? My argument depends on the assertion of celibacy's place on the list of ways to express one's sexuality. But does celibacy belong on that list? As we conclude the discussion of non-dualistic theology the understanding of celibacy may be reformulated upon this new theological foundation. Celibacy is a choice to express oneself as a whole person, to offer one's whole self to God's service. Celibacy is a choice to remain unpartnered in order to serve God wholly and God's people wholly, to love all children of God as one's own children. Celibacy is a gift offered to the world, a gift of connection and agape love, but not a gift all can give. Celibacy is a charism, a gift of God to the individual that receives it and to the world that reaps its rewards.

Celibacy is therefore an expression of one's sexuality, not a sexual orientation. One is not born a celibate, but with support, practice and a level of integration, celibacy may be achieved. Celibacy is not asexuality. An asexual exists "lacking in sensuousness, a characteristic that has more to do with play and pleasure than anything

else.”<sup>30</sup> An asexual has little or no interest in genital expression of sexuality. Conversely, in order to achieve celibacy, one must come to terms with the passions, desires and drive toward genital expression. One who is focused on celibate achievement must be sexually well-adjusted, or else the attempt is difficult, even futile. Sipe explained, “Fear of self or sexuality, ignorance of self or sexuality, compulsion or guilt are contraindicators of a vocation to celibacy and are serious impediments to any vow or commitment.”<sup>31</sup> One who chooses celibacy is challenged to be a sexual being involved in non-exclusive, non-genital relationships for the purpose of service. This challenge is extraordinarily difficult and should not be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently, discreetly and in the fear of God.<sup>32</sup> In this vein, the choice to be celibate must be made by the individual.

## **ASSERTION TWO: POST-HIERARCHY**

As a feminist, I additionally propose that any theology of celibacy must be post-hierarchical. The essential element to permanent celibacy is the voluntary personal choice made by the individual, not by the Church hierarchy –neither the hierarchy of the Vatican nor the General Conference. Feminist Christian ethicist Christine Gudorf stated,

Permanent celibacy, as any other form of pleasure deprivation, should be chosen only with the understanding that the individual accepts this deprivation as instrumental in procuring some greater pleasure, and has developed appropriate alternative avenues for satisfying the physical,

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<sup>30</sup> Sean D. Sammon, An Undivided Heart: Making Sense of Celibate Chastity (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1993), 75.

<sup>31</sup> A.W. Richard Sipe, Living the Celibate Life (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri/Triumph Books, 2004), 51.

<sup>32</sup> “United Methodist Service of Christian Marriage II,” The United Methodist Book of Worship (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 129.

emotional and symbolic human desires normally satisfied by sex in this culture.<sup>33</sup>

Any feminist approach to celibacy must essentially require the individual's consent in such a vital personal choice. A patriarchal hierarchy, such as the Church, undermines the power of the individual by mandating the appropriateness of one's sexual life. If celibacy is the response to a call by God, and is not a form of sexual self-rejection rather a choice made in sexual self-affirmation, then such a decision is to be honored and respected. But celibacy used as a form of control to curb sexual behavior outside the norm, or to discriminate against a certain faction of society, should not be tolerated. Such doctrines do nothing to nurture the individual, the community, or the Church.

Sexuality is essential to our very makeup as human beings. Sexuality is not something to choose, nor something to fear: sexuality is part of who we are. The United Methodist Social Principles affirm sexuality as God's gift to all persons, thereby acknowledging the import of sexuality in our lives.

We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift to all persons. We believe persons may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society.<sup>34</sup>

But the *expression* of said sexuality is more complicated, due to the behaviors and activities the Church may find unacceptable. Therefore, it is no surprise that clerical sexuality is mandated with specific guidelines, especially for those who are single, either by choice or by circumstance. This mandate, and not celibacy itself, is the enemy of justice in the sexual lives of single clergy. The mandate impedes the individual's

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<sup>33</sup> Gudorf, 99.

<sup>34</sup> Book of Discipline, paragraph 161 G, 100.

power in self-determination, restricts personal freedom and obstructs the gift of love available to the community through an honest declaration of voluntary celibacy.

The issue of human sexuality has a particularly awkward history in the United Methodist Church. Protests, clashes and demonstrations around the issue of homosexuality have marred the discussion of sexuality, so much so that the conversation is stunted. This reluctance to discuss sexuality has relegated sexuality to the private sphere. But sexuality – the way we relate to one another - does have a profound impact on our public lives.<sup>35</sup> Defined in the manner of James Nelson, the term ‘sexuality’ goes far beyond our genital activity. Sexuality involves our own embodiment and the way that manifests itself in our relationships. Insofar as our public lives involve relationships with others, sexuality does exist in the public sphere.

Furthermore, as relationships occur between partners or in groups of human beings, we relate in a dynamic of power. Someone is in charge, others are not. Someone is charged with decision-making, others are responsible for putting the decision into action. Power exists in all relationships, and is not in itself good or evil. In his work, The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault detailed the interwoven nature of power relationships. “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual

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<sup>35</sup> Should this discussion be regulated to the private sphere? The delicate nature of evaluating and discussing the details of one’s intimate life feels awkward in the public sphere, and in my opinion, *should* be regulated to the private sphere, to one’s own individual choice. Unfortunately as the General Conference established the Task Force on homosexuality in 1968, as the word “homosexuality” first appeared in the Book of Discipline in 1972, as Ordination requirements for homosexuals were proposed and defeated in 1980 and finally with the insertion of the seven last words in 1984: the private was made public. The intimate lives of clergy, closely but silently monitored throughout Methodist history, are now public fodder.

relations), but are imminent in the latter.”<sup>36</sup> Power, and the dynamic in which power participates between partners, is imminent in sexual relationships, not merely relationships that involve genital activity, but relations between embodied, gendered human beings. The power dynamic between partners, if equitable, can be life-giving or, if non-equitable, can be destructive. Feminist Mary E. Hunt wrote, “Sex [needs to] be looked at in public, communal ways, not simply private individual ways...Insofar as sexual relationships are just, they reflect and enhance power sharing.”<sup>37</sup> If those sexual relationships are just, they both “reflect and enhance” the power dynamic between partners. However, when those relations are unjust, they reinforce and encourage an unequal and destructive power dynamic. Domestic violence provides an example of power used to reinforce and encourage an unequal dynamic. The dominant partner exercises control over the relationship and over the other partner by the use of violence, coercion and intimidation. The submissive partner takes it, thereby encouraging the continuity of this destructive pattern. The Church, by means of the mandate, acts as the dominant partner in its relationship with single clergy. The Church, as the dominant partner, exercises its control by coercion and intimidation and single clergy, in the shadow of the mandate, are forced to take it. In the description of “just love,” in her book of the same name, Margaret Farley characterized justice in sexual relationships where power is shared. “Sex should not be used in ways that exploit, objectify or dominate; rape, violence, and harmful uses of power in sexual relationships are ruled

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<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, vol.1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Mary E. Hunt, “Just Good Sex: Feminist Catholicism and Human Rights” in Good Sex, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt and Radhika Balakrishnan (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 172.

out.”<sup>38</sup> In such a relationship, the submissive partner is devalued as an object to dominate, “a *thing* for the Other.”<sup>39</sup> Single clergy become a thing for the Church to dominate as we continue to accept the terms by which the Church operates. And the Church is aware of its actions in the devaluation of single clergy. The Church merely pretends not to notice, as Sartre wrote, “that the Other is forced by the constraint of needs to sell himself as a material object.”<sup>40</sup> If we are called and are committed to ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church, single clergy are forced to adhere to the will of the Church in matters of sexual expression.

However, a celibate relationship is not primarily a relationship between the individual and the Church: it is a relationship between the individual and God. The celibate’s relationship with God has *repercussions* in his/her relationships with others and with the Church, but primarily celibacy is a way to express oneself in relationship with the Divine. And yet, celibacy is only one form of sexual expression, one type of relationship possible with God, one to which not everyone is called.

Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.<sup>41</sup>

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, each person is the recipient of a unique gift and each is called to serve in a unique way. One discerns his/her calling, leadership style and relationship with God. Ideally said relationship will be a close one, nurtured with prayer and study, one in which both God and the individual are

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<sup>38</sup> Margaret A. Farley, Just Love (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 231.

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, vol. 1, Theory of Practical Ensembles, ed. Jonathon Réé, translated by Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 1991), 110.

<sup>40</sup> Sartre, 110.

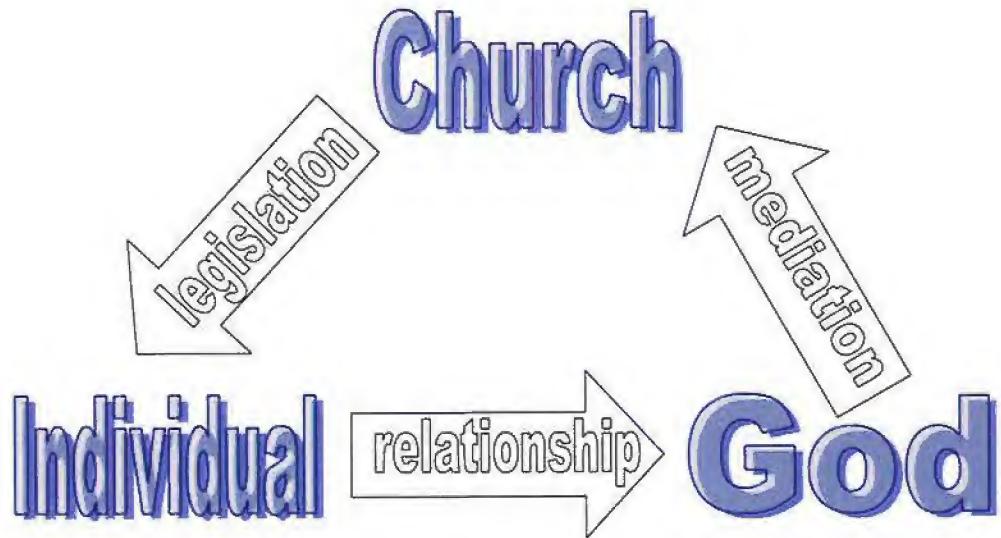
<sup>41</sup> 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6.

committed to one another. But the relationship does not end with the individual and God. Through the process of candidacy and ordination, the Church enters into this intimate relationship as a third party. The Church acknowledges the call of God to the individual and validates the individual's gifts and graces to serve. The Church affirms (or denies) God's selection of the individual and then, by the mandate, lays a template upon the relationship between the individual and God and demands conformity. "This is the relationship you will now maintain," says the Church, "if you are to be ordained." But according to Paul, we each are gifted differently. Thus we will each maintain a different relationship with God. No one relationship is superior to another; we each have our own way of interacting with God and each way has its own merit. However, the Church, via the mandate, doesn't recognize the value of variation. The Church expects all single clergy to relate to God in celibate relationship.

In Family Systems Theory, this conflict could be identified as triangulation. Edwin Friedman's book Generation to Generation explains one aspect of the emotional triangle. In an individual's attempt "to change the relationship of two others, they 'triangle' themselves into that relationship."<sup>42</sup> The third party enters into the system hoping to change the relationship between the two parties. In the case of single clergy and our relationships with God, the Church inserted itself with the seven last words.

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<sup>42</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, Generation to Generation (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 36.

**Table 5: Triangulation in Celibate Relationship**

By interfering in this relationship between the individual and God, the Church establishes itself as Mediator, the conduit between God and the individual. In this system, the Church validates God's call, affirms/denies the individual's gifts and legislates the type of relationship the two parties will share. Friedman warned against the effectiveness and the results of such triangulation. "If one is the third party in an emotional triangle it is generally not possible to bring change...to the relationship of the two other parts by trying to change their relationship directly."<sup>43</sup> Not only is triangulation ineffective as a method to bring about change, but actually may reinforce the existing relationship. "Attempts to change the relationship of the other two sides of an emotional triangle not only are generally ineffective, but also homeostatic forces often convert these efforts to their opposite intent."<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the results to the third party may do more harm than good.

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<sup>43</sup> Friedman, 37.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman, 37.

To the extent a third party to an emotional triangle tries unsuccessfully to change the relationship of the other two, the more likely it is that the third party will wind up with the stress for the other two.<sup>45</sup>

If the intent of the Church is to affect change in the relationship between single clergy and God, the method of triangulation only works against that aim. The primary relationship between the individual and God is one the Church should honor and nurture rather than dictate and legislate.

In an intimate relationship between two partners, affection is exchanged, promises are made, and challenges are confronted and worked through. The two partners that comprise a celibate relationship are the individual and God, and in this union affection is exchanged, promises are made and challenges are confronted and worked through. In order for the relationship to endure both parties must be committed to the relationship. As much as we believe God is committed to humanity, the burden of commitment lies on the individual celibate. But when this relationship is mandated and certain behaviors are required, the level of commitment of the individual suffers. Regardless of the sexual relationship that is required – a marriage, a celibate relationship with God, a partnership with a person of the same sex – it is possible for one to derive pleasure from that relationship. But the choice must be left to the individual. Currently, the Church exercises its power with a demand of adherence and a threat of consequences: Be celibate or else! The alternative to celibacy is a life outside the ordained ministry.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Friedman, 37.

<sup>46</sup> One difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the United Methodist Church is the audience to whom the threat is directed: In Roman Catholicism expulsion is threatened to all clergy if the vow of celibacy is violated and in Methodism it is a threat only to single clergy.

Does the mandate work? According to the survey of clergy from the California-Pacific Annual Conference detailed in Chapter One: apparently not. Of those clergy who identified themselves as single, widowed, divorced or partnered, an overwhelming 90% admitted to be obligated to the mandate but not practicing celibacy. These respondents identified themselves as single, knew of the mandate and admitted to non-adherence. The boldness in their response indicates a blatant disregard for the mandate as well as little fear of retribution by the hierarchy. Admittedly, the California-Pacific Annual Conference has a reputation for its open-mindedness on issues of sexuality: one respondent characterized the attitude of superiors as “don’t ask, don’t tell.”<sup>47</sup> But for those expecting adherence to “celibacy in singleness,” this response from individual clergy disciplinarily obligated to celibacy proves the ineffectiveness of the mandate. The threat of expulsion from the ordained ministry apparently does not influence the individual into celibate action. According to Sipe, writing on preparation for celibate life, it is the level of *integration* of the celibate, and not a threat from the hierarchy, that facilitates his/her ability to combat loneliness, temptation and the unrequited loving service to God’s people.<sup>48</sup> Structures and processes that facilitate wholeness assist celibates in their relationships with God, not legislation from a domineering hierarchy. In her book Personal Commitments, Margaret Farley explained the ethical dilemma of legislating love. “The language of violence and fear, of coercion and terror, seems to contradict the whole point of commitment to love.”<sup>49</sup> To utilize the power of the

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<sup>47</sup> Clergy Subject #1, Chapter 1, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 171.

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Farley, Personal Commitments (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986), 35.

hierarchy to demand adherence to a prescribed expression of sexuality does nothing to further the cause of love.

The Church has recognized the danger of power regarding the issue of clergy abuse. In such cases, clergy hold a position of power and influence in the context of a congregation and should not violate that trust given by the congregation. Anne Underwood, in an essay entitled “Clergy Sexual Misconduct: A Justice Issue,” explained the use of the power dynamic in relationship. “Power does not exist within a vacuum. Power is relational, and in itself it is neither good nor evil, but morally neutral. How it is used in relationship to others becomes the justice issue.”<sup>50</sup> How the Church, as an Institution, *uses* its power determines the just or unjust treatment of those in relationship with the Church. The mandate itself is unjust in that it isolates those who are single – “singles us out” – with expectations, regulations and repercussions, requiring us to express our sexuality in a way that may be counter to our calling.

When the Church uses its power to dominate, it restricts the freedom of the individual in determining their own destiny. Why is that important?

Because freedom of choice as we experience it is a capacity for self-determination as embodied, inspirited beings, which means a capacity to choose not only our own actions but our ends and our own loves. It is a capacity therefore to determine the meaning of our own lives and, within limits, our destiny.<sup>51</sup>

We, as human beings, have been given freedom to determine our own actions, ends and loves, as Farley writes, and to use that freedom of choice to derive meaning from our lives. The Church does need rules and restrictions to determine the character and

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<sup>50</sup> Anne Underwood, “Clergy Sexual Misconduct: A Justice Issue,” in Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love, ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 302.

<sup>51</sup> Farley, Just Love, 212.

commitment of those seeking ordination. However, the mandate and the rights of ordination are currently linked, restricting the choice of the single clergyperson not called to celibacy. Either we agree to the mandate, become ordained and follow it grudgingly; we agree to the mandate, become ordained and choose not to follow it, hoping to avoid discovery; or we disagree with the mandate and do not become ordained. Just Love, Margaret Farley's 2006 book, proposed a framework for sexual ethics in which justice is the goal in loving relationships. One of the elements of the framework is *Free Consent*.

I refer here to the particular obligation to respect the right of human persons to determine their own actions and their relationships in the sexual sphere of their lives... The requirement of free consent, then, opposes sexual harassment, pedophilia, and other instances of disrespect for persons' capacity for, and right to, freedom of choice.<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps the comparison is unfair: to link what the Church has done to single clergy with something as heinous as pedophilia, even as they both share the distinction of "forced sexual experiences." To better illustrate, I will compare the mandate to a different sexual situation, that of arranged marriage.

Pinar Ilkkaracan, in an effort to understand the treatment of women in the Islamic world, collected data for Women for Women's Human Rights in eastern Turkey. She surveyed 599 women, utilizing a face-to-face interview system, to discover the realities of women's lives including civil versus religious marriage, bride price, polygyny, women's consent to marriage, reproductive health, the possible consequences of extramarital relationships for women and domestic violence.<sup>53</sup> In the

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<sup>52</sup> Farley, Just Love, 219.

<sup>53</sup> Pinar Ilkkaracan, "Islam and Women's Sexuality: A Research Report from Turkey," in Good Sex, 63.

section of her article “Islam and Women’s Sexuality” entitled *Polygyny and Forced or Arranged Marriages*, Ilkkaracan explains the lack of free consent in this context.

Under the Turkish Civil Code, the consent of both the woman and the man is a precondition for marriage, yet women living in the region often have no influence over the choice of their prospective partner and are frequently married against their will. In fact, even in cases in which women are consulted about the choice of a husband, they cannot exercise their right of consent to the full because of a high degree of social control over women’s sexuality maintained by the taboo on premarital sex, the practice of endogamy, or the threat of violence against women who do not comply with the choice of the family.<sup>54</sup>

In the contemporary West, the response to an arranged marriage may be one of disbelief and disgust. How could one be forced into a sexual arrangement in which they have no choice? Like an arranged marriage, the mandate removes the freedom from the individual and gives that determination to an outside party: for the brides documented in Ilkkarasan’s article, the Turkish family makes the choice for relationship. In the case of single clergy, the Church makes that determination. With mandated celibacy, there is no threat of violence if one chooses not to comply, but the threat of exclusion from the ministry or removal from the ministry is threat enough. Free consent must be a criterion upon which our relationships are based. Our ability to choose for ourselves is not an excuse for sexual hedonism, merely an acknowledgement of self-determination. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”<sup>55</sup> Because we have been given freedom, we must exercise caution to do what is just for all involved, for others and for ourselves. And in this freedom, some may choose a life of celibacy, as Nelson suggests, and “if this is

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<sup>54</sup> Ilkkaracan, 69.

<sup>55</sup> 1 Corinthians 10: 23-24.

chosen in sexual self-affirmation and not self-rejection, if this is chosen for the sake of faithful integrity and not in anxious quest for personal virtue, then such celibacy is to be affirmed and celebrated.”<sup>56</sup>

### ASSERTION THREE: SELF-AFFIRMATION

As we reject the assertions of dualism and deny the hierarchy’s demands on our sexuality, we then need to recognize our own mastery over our life choices. Our bodies are not controlled either by philosophical oppression or by institutional polity. We can love our bodies and ourselves and choose celibacy as a response to that self-love. Our sexuality – our ability to connect in relationship to God and to others – is an essential component of who we are, not merely what we do in our bedrooms. We must define sexuality in a broad manner, as opposed to the “genitalization” of sexuality – the belief that “human sexuality equals sex, and sex equals genital sex acts.”<sup>57</sup>

Being celibate is not merely something one does or does not do. Celibacy has to do with being – something a person is – and is intimately bound up with how a person integrates three factors: relationships, inner resources and sequential challenges.<sup>58</sup>

Celibacy is not merely a choice to forego a sexual relationship to avoid scandal or disgrace or disapproval of one’s congregation. It is a choice with spiritual ramifications. Celibacy is a spiritual decision to “live without” in order to commit to the service of others and the service of Christ for the sake of the Kingdom.

My calling as a celibate came long before my call to ministry. As other girls formed their knight-on-a-white-horse dreams during childhood, I developed fantasies of single life. One fantasy placed me in a passionate romance with a race-car driver who

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<sup>56</sup> Nelson, Embodiment, 157-58.

<sup>57</sup> Nelson, Embodiment, 13.

<sup>58</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 167.

eventually died a tragic death on the racetrack, leaving me alone to raise our son in Europe. Another found me single and adopting eight or nine children, each from a different country, living on a sustainable farm. In another I was desperately in love, but being a super-spy I had to follow my own destiny, leaving that unrequited lover behind. In none of these childhood fantasies was I a happy wife or a happy partner. A case may be made for the drama in my fantasy relationships by identifying me as a young soap-opera addict. This is true, but I believe these fantasies to be the beginning of my call to celibate life. Adolescence and early-adulthood only brought relationships that were more awkward and frustrating and finally, upon writing ordination papers I discovered my call to celibacy. At age thirty-two I “came out” as a celibate.<sup>59</sup>

Celibacy is a valid form of my sexuality, one that affirms who I am, who I was created to be. For me, it is freeing. Finally, I don’t need to play the “dating games”; I don’t need to worry about finding a mate before I turn forty. I can legitimately extricate myself from conversations that encourage me to “pretty myself up” for another person or find potential mates in the grocery store, in the church or on an online dating service. I am a celibate and in that expression I affirm my *self*: the person God created me to be.

But celibacy is more than just remaining single and unpartnered. Celibacy is a gift of one’s life, one’s energy and one’s whole self. I understand my call to ministry to be linked with the understanding of myself as a celibate. I am called to travel unhindered, to go where the church and where God needs me. Celibacy allows me to

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<sup>59</sup> As with any “coming out” process, this was met with skepticism, disbelief and misunderstanding. For a few years I endured questions like, “What happens if you meet the right person?” and “What if you change your mind?” I did feel I was disappointing my family, depriving them of children, but they’ve been tremendously supportive through the process and they’ve accepted me as I am, as God made me.

declare as Francis Asbury did, “I have no possessions or babes to bind me to the soil.”<sup>60</sup>

Celibacy is a commitment to love and serve God’s children, forsaking the chance to bear children of one’s own. It is fundamentally a vow of fidelity to Christ, a promise to dedicate one’s whole self to his service. If celibacy is seen in the guise of post-dualism, post-hierarchy and self-affirmation, then each of us, those who choose celibate lives and those who don’t, may be honored and respected in our sexual identities.

The goal of the mandate concentrates on the genital activity of single clergy, rather than what is more important: loving, self-affirming, life-giving relationships based on love. Farley posed this question to us all: “How did sex become more important than love, and almost more important than life?”<sup>61</sup> According to 91% of our clergy sample documented in chapter one, the working definition of celibacy is simply the resistance to intercourse. As long as one avoids intercourse, one is successful in the celibate endeavor. But this definition cheapens the celibate endeavor *and* the one based in partnership. Sex is not the defining difference between those who are called to partnership and those who are called to celibacy. Sex is an expression of relationship. Sex is not the standard upon which our relationships are to be judged. Nelson’s Body Theology describes a preferred standard.

The ethics that flow from this theology will embrace one standard for evaluating sexual expressions. I believe that standard is love, multidimensional in its reality, with *epithymia* (sexual desire), *eros* (hunger for fulfillment), *philia* (friendship) and *agape* (self-giving) its necessary aspects. No one of those dimensions can be slighted.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Asbury, Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, 609.

<sup>61</sup> Farley, Just Love, 22.

<sup>62</sup> Nelson, Body Theology, 22.

The mandate assumes the marital relationship to be a safe haven, a loving union, a functional relationship. As long as one maintains “fidelity in marriage” all is permissible. Unfortunately, this is an unfounded assumption. Marriage can be a union that fosters an unhealthy power dynamic, violence, or domination. Not all marital sex is pleasurable, healthy or loving. The mandate also assumes the non-married relationship to be one that either will eventually end in marriage or is just plain “incompatible with Christian teaching.”<sup>63</sup> The criteria for relationships should be love. “Great love is a love that is right, just, true and good.” Farley explained. “It does not contradict the concrete reality of either lover or beloved; it is true to the nature of the relationship between them.”<sup>64</sup>

As Cobb suggested in 1984, sexuality is a difficult matter that requires some “hard-thinking.”<sup>65</sup> Not only is thinking required, but also discussion and transformative exchanges are necessary to reformulate our manner of interacting with issues of human sexuality. Presently, due perhaps to the fear of opening the proverbial can of worms that is homosexuality in the church, there is a deafening silence surrounding issues of clerical sexuality. Furthermore, there exists virtually no written material that defines Protestant celibacy or provides instructional advice on how to live it. The silence surrounding the issue only perpetuates the misunderstanding of the place of celibacy in the life of the church, and further adds to the devaluation of those single and celibate clergy and the resources they are able to offer the connection.

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<sup>63</sup> Book of Discipline, Social Principles, Paragraph 71f.

<sup>64</sup> Farley, Just Love, 244.

<sup>65</sup> Cobb, 185.

The mandate is unjust and unfair to those who are celibate and to those who are not. The mandate restricts those not called to celibate life by forcing them into an unwanted lifestyle. By doing so, the mandate devalues those of us who are called to celibacy by characterizing our gift as merely “non-genital.” If we are to change the current system and destroy the mandate, or if we are to continue with the current structure, single clergy must have the training and preparation necessary to ensure a depth of understanding regarding the challenges and the benefits of a celibate life. Through preparation, we can better facilitate success and understanding in celibate life.

## CHAPTER 5: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

### AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL FOR A RETREAT WITH CANDIDATES FOR MINISTRY

In his 1996 book, Celibacy: a Way of Loving, Living and Serving, A. W. Richard Sipe wrote, “It has been unfair to require celibacy of priests, nuns and brothers and to fail to train them for it.”<sup>1</sup> This comment, made in reference to the challenge of celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church, also applies to the United Methodist Church. It is unfair for us to require “celibacy in singleness” without open discussion, adequate support and proper preparation to live such a life. If we are to continue with Paragraph 304.2 as it is, we need a system in which those obligated by the mandate have the opportunity to ask questions, to discuss the challenges and benefits of celibacy and to seek the counsel of a mentor, spiritual director or psychologist.<sup>2</sup> If Paragraph 304.2 is altered to withdraw the mandate for “celibacy in singleness,” invariably some who voluntarily choose celibacy will remain in the ministry, and the system will need to support them in a similar way. Moreover, in order to understand one another, it is important for us to learn about and discuss the options we will *not* choose: for celibates to learn about and discuss partnership and for those who will be partnered to learn about celibacy.

This is a starting point: a resource to facilitate a retreat about celibacy for ministerial candidates. The resource is designed for a three-day retreat gathering for candidates who have been commissioned and are probationary members of the Annual Conference. In the Cal-Pac Annual Conference these gatherings are called RIM events (Residence in Ministry)

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<sup>1</sup> Sipe, Celibacy, 52.

<sup>2</sup> As a reminder, the mandate for “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” has remained in The Book of Discipline since 1984, but its location has changed. In the 1996 Book of Discipline the mandate, previously in Paragraph 404.4e appeared in Paragraph 304.2, where it remains to this day.

and six are required for those seeking full ordination. They are designed to supplement the curriculum of the seminary, for those subjects not addressed by the seminary faculty. Because the Conference is diverse, the group of participants will be diverse: comprised of representatives of many ethnicities, various sexual orientations, different genders and ages. Therefore, the retreat leadership will need to be sensitive to cultural attitudes regarding marriage and unmarried sexual activity, in order to serve the entire retreat community adequately. The following schedule outlines the retreat in detail.

**Tuesday:**

*Lunch*

1:00-2:00 –Prayer, Orientation and Business

2:00-4:00 – Session One (Introduction, definitions, experience)

*Dinner*

6:00-7:30 – Session Two (United Methodist History and Reflection)

**Wednesday:**

*Breakfast*

9:00-9:30 - Worship

9:30-11:30 – Session Three (Catholic Understanding of Celibacy, with guest speakers and reflection of Protestant differences)

*Lunch*

1:00 – 3:00 – Session Four (Challenges of Celibate Life, Challenges of Partnered life with guest speakers)

*Dinner*

Free time in the evening

**Thursday:**

*Breakfast*

9:00-9:30 - Worship

9:30-11:30 Session Five (Role Models, resources)

One essential element of retreat setting is community building and, in this way, meals are important. The opportunity to break bread together facilitates a level of comfort and familiarity that hopefully will translate into discussion during sessions. Communalism is rare in our culture and a retreat is one arena in which community can be fostered. The world in

which we live, the culture in which we find ourselves, is primarily focused on individualism: How can I survive in this world? How can I prosper in business? Looking out for number one has become the mantra of not only a generation of Americans, but for America as a whole. A Christian retreat is a radical departure from the pervasive individualism of our time. As Richard Foster stated in his book Educating Congregations:

Perhaps the most powerful of all gifts found in the Christian heritage is its sense of community. Its promises confront the messages of fragmentation and violence dominating social relationships. It breaks through our finite distinctions of race, culture, age, class, gender, and [fosters our] ability to celebrate the necessary interdependence of all people.<sup>3</sup>

The sense of community in a retreat setting can be nurtured in every aspect of the retreat: through worship, in fellowship activities, and through work in sessions. These opportunities offer a unique chance to gather without regard to generation, race, gender, sexual orientation or economic status. But before we recognize the community in our group, we must address the unity within our selves. “Community cannot take root in a divided life,” wrote Parker Palmer in his book The Courage to Teach. “Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others.”<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the group will begin with prayer and worship each day, to provide space and time to gather oneself before we gather together. Taking a cue from our Catholic counterparts, we recognize the importance of prayer and community not only in living a celibate life, but for all of us. Prayer and community are vital in achieving whole-person integration and in facilitating an environment of openness. This sense of openness can unite us and give us the opportunity to

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<sup>3</sup> Charles R. Foster, Educating Congregations (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 90.

learn what God has to teach us, to learn what others have to teach us and to teach one another from our own experience and knowledge.

### **Goals of the Retreat:**

- To create an open environment, a place of safety and support for discussion about sexuality.
- To develop community in a group of ministerial candidates from various backgrounds.
- To provide information to help participants discern their own sexual calling.
- To educate participants about celibacy.
- To encourage participants to learn from others' experiences with celibacy/partnership.

### **Session One (Tuesday, 2:00-4:00pm):**

We will begin by recognizing the uncomfortable nature of discussing sexuality in a public forum with strangers and explain why this is a necessary discussion especially for those who are single and will be obligated to the mandate. We will then break into small groups and ask each group to develop a definition for the following terms: sexuality, sex, gender, sexual orientation, asexuality and celibacy. The purpose of defining terms is many faceted. First, the process allows participants to work together and get to know one another. Second, it gives the group a chance to think about terminology. As the data shows in Table 4 of Chapter One, we currently have an ambiguous working definition of celibacy. This discussion of terminology provides us the opportunity to create a common language. In order for us to communicate about sexuality, we all must have similar understandings of our subject matter. In this way, we will be able to "speak the same language." Diversity, while a tremendous blessing, has the ability to stunt our conversation if we do not begin with an attempt to corporately understand the subject matter. In our "normal church life" we do share a similar language to communicate with one another, but not to facilitate a discussion of sexuality.

Christian communities have rich and complex vocabularies. They consist of words, signs, images, symbols, and rhythms. These building blocks to communication are clustered into spoken, sung, and enacted messages... This corporate vocabulary distinguishes one community from another.<sup>5</sup>

After the groups share their definitions, discussion will follow about the definitions as understood by the church. A presentation of Paragraph 304.2 will follow, with the revelation that no definition of celibacy exists in The Book of Discipline. Participants will be asked for their impressions of celibacy and these will be posted to be visible and available for comment.

The leadership will then present three different stories regarding celibacy. The presentation will not make conclusions, but present the information using Gestalt communicatory practices. The Gestalt practice presents several disparate elements and encourages the individual to piece together the whole. Echoing the theology presented in Chapter Four, the whole is the goal and by utilizing the Gestalt method, we put theory into practice. Max Wertheimer, one of the principal proponents of Gestalt psychology, explained the theory this way:

There are wholes, the behavior of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes.<sup>6</sup>

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore explained this learning process in her book Teaching from the Heart. “Gestalt is a theory of perception and learning based on the ways people organize different phenomena into a unity greater than the sum of the parts.”<sup>7</sup> By illustrating

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<sup>5</sup> Foster, 69.

<sup>6</sup> Max Wertheimer, *Über Gestalttheorie*, “Gestalt Theory,” address before the Kant Society, Berlin, 7 Dec. 1924, in A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology, prepared by Willis D. Ellis (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938, reprint, Highland, NY: Gestalt Journal Press, 1977); accessed 10 Feb. 2007; available from <http://gestalttheory.net/archive/wert1.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Teaching from the Heart (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 61.

various parts of the story, without explanation or interpretation, the human being creates the whole on his/her own. This method of transmitting information should be familiar to us, as Moore explained.

Gestalt communication should seem quite natural to Jews and Christians whose Scriptures are often woven together in this organic way...The arrangement of texts suggested a theme or questions, but left enough openness that interpreters have worked for centuries to name and interpret those themes and questions.<sup>8</sup>

The stories to be told can be selected from the Leadership, but three are suggested below. Why these stories? The following stories demonstrate the complexity of sexual expression in service to God. The first story presents a foundational illustration in which Jesus addresses the Pharisaic question of marriage and divorce. In the discussion, he also posits a third way of being, that of the eunuch. In this passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus presents the eunuch as a way of being that one is born into, one is subjected to by another or one accepts as a way to serve God. While the term usually refers to a castrated man, the definition, for purposes of discussion, may be understood to include those who are celibate. The second story presents the circumstances surrounding the development of the mandate. In presentation of this history, participants will hear the original intent of the mandate and consider whether the legislation currently serves that intent. The third story demonstrates one bishop's attitude regarding clerical marriage versus the single preacher. Francis Asbury conveyed his convictions in his writings and in his appointments and ordination of preachers. In utilizing Asbury's words, participants will ponder the Early Methodist attitude about clerical marriage and the complications derived from married life. In

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<sup>8</sup> Moore, 62.

offering these three illustrations, the leadership will present some of the intricacies of serving the Church as a sexual being.

### **Illustration One: Jesus on the Eunuchs**

Matthew 19:3-12

**3** Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" **4** He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female,' **5** and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? **6** So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." **7** They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" **8** He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. **9** And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." **10** His disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." **11** But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. **12** For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."<sup>9</sup>

### **Illustration Two: Bishop Tuell's gathering in Albuquerque**

Bishop Jack Tuell had finished a speaking engagement at The Women's Clergy Conference in New Mexico in February of 1983 and, in the Albuquerque airport, he met with two other bishops and an executive from the Division of Ordained Ministry from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. There the four men sat in the airport lounge and it being "the time of year to put together legislation for General Conference"<sup>10</sup> they formulated the language for a proposal to address the question of clerical sexuality. The motivation for the proposal was the ongoing controversy on homosexuality, although its language was generic, its impact was widespread. There, in the Albuquerque airport, they scratched out

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 19: 3-12.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop Jack Tuell, conversation, December 3, 2005

seven words to add to the requirements for candidates for the ministry: “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Illustration Three: Francis Asbury’s trouble with married preachers**

An entry in Asbury’s Journal, explaining his own unmarried state.

I could hardly expect to find a woman with grace enough to enable her to live but one week out of the fifty-two with her husband. Besides, what right has any man to take advantage of the affections of a woman, make her his wife, and by voluntary absence subvert the whole order and economy of the marriage state, by separating those whom neither God, nature, nor the requirements of civil society permit to put asunder? It is neither just nor generous.<sup>12</sup>

Echoing the words of Hebrews 13:4, he wrote,

Marriage is honorable in all, but to me it is a ceremony awful as death. Well may it be so, when I calculate we have lost the traveling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location.<sup>13</sup>

Our preachers get wives and a home and run to their *dears* almost every night, how can they, by personal observation, know the state of the families it is part of their duty to watch over for good.<sup>14</sup>

After the stories are shared, the full group will be asked for their impressions and discussion will be encouraged. At this time, United Methodist history will be shared including the opinions of John Wesley and Francis Asbury regarding the marital state of itinerant preachers. Also approached will be the history of the mandate, including the General Conference decision to establish the task force on homosexuality in 1968, the first appearance of the word “homosexuality” in The Book of Discipline in 1972, the proposal of

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<sup>11</sup> Tuell, conversation.

<sup>12</sup> Asbury, Heart, 542-43.

<sup>13</sup> Asbury, Heart, 564.

<sup>14</sup> Asbury, Journal and Letters, 639.

the change in ordination requirements for homosexuals and subsequent defeat in 1980 and finally the insertion of the seven last words in 1984.

**Session Two (Tuesday, 6:00-7:30pm):**

After dinner is shared together, we will meet for a shortened session in the evening, in which we will focus on reflection of our own sexual calling. We will meet in small groups and in the full session to address questions like those that follow:

- What are the taboos in discussing our own sexuality?
- What is your first memory of calling as a sexual being? How did you imagine your life would turn out?
- To what are you called? Marriage? Partnership? Parenthood? Celibacy? What are the benefits of that life? What are the challenges?
- To what are you NOT called? What are the benefits of that life? What are the challenges?

**Session Three (Wednesday, 9:30-11:30am):**

On the morning of the second day, the group will welcome two guest speakers from the Roman Catholic Church - a priest and a woman religious – that will discuss their own journey as celibates. The discussion may include the Catholic understanding of interconnection of call to ministry and call to celibacy, preparation for celibate life in seminary, the resources available to priests and women religious, and the benefits and challenges of celibacy from their perspective.

Both speakers will be asked to prepare a short case study to present to the group regarding a challenge with celibacy and how that challenge was handled or mishandled. “The case study approach is basically an attempt to learn from a particular, concrete slice of reality.”<sup>15</sup> The method takes a particular incident and opens it up to reveal the characters, feelings, and conflicts in the situation. The retreat participants will then be asked, “What

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<sup>15</sup> Moore, 28.

would you do in the same situation?" Discussion and brainstorming of possible outcomes will ensue and through this process, questions are answered and community is built. "The case, when discussed with others, becomes a part of the community life, even building the community and its shared values."<sup>16</sup>

Retreat participants will also be asked to take notes on the differences between the Catholic understanding of celibacy and the Protestant understanding. After the presentations, questions will follow and, time providing, we will conclude with our observations of the differences.

**Session Four (Wednesday, 1:00-3:00pm):**

After lunch, we will gather with a Marriage and Family Counselor and a Spiritual Director to discuss the challenges of clerical sexuality. We will examine the issues of clerical marriage, the role of the spouse in ministry, conflicts between "family life" and work, how to prioritize and balance family and ministry. We will also discuss the challenges of celibate life, including the accompanying loneliness, triggers that lead to temptation, and the place of prayer and community within celibate life. We will also discuss the dynamic state of clerical sexuality including temporary celibacy, dating and engagement and the unwritten rules for clergy relationships.

To spread the gospel, to witness to the love of Jesus Christ in the world, to love God and neighbor, to lead others to the light of Christ through Word and deed: this is the call of ministerial life. As one is called to ministry and s/he commits one's whole self to the work of the church. But this work, although tremendously rewarding, is difficult and self-care is essential to maintain a healthy degree of emotional stability some call *balance*.

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<sup>16</sup> Moore, 30.

John Ortberg, in his book The Life You've Always Wanted, detailed our cultural pursuit of balance. Balance, according to Ortberg, is like a pie chart with all aspects of life divided into equal parts: spiritual, vocational, relational, intellectual, physical, and financial. These “slices” all need to be nurtured and cared for so that each can have *equal* significance in one’s life. But this division of life’s “slices” leads to compartmentalization of our faith, for we are only allowed to experience the divine within the divine slice, but not when we are in relationships or at work or while dealing with money, for these subjects have their own slices of life’s pie. Furthermore, there are occasions when one life-slice becomes more important or needs more attention. In a time of medical crisis, for example, the physical slice overtakes most of the pie chart, with all other aspects of life decreasing in size and import until the time when the crisis is over and equilibrium is achieved.

Instead of a desperate pursuit of “balance,” Ortberg suggests we pursue what St. Augustine calls *the well-ordered heart*: to love the right thing to the right degree in the right way with the right kind of love.<sup>17</sup> A well-ordered heart allows us to love people with the right kind of love. In such a case we would never forsake the boundaries between personal and professional relationships. We would love God-given gifts like beauty and leadership to the right degree, never elevating these things above God. We would love ministry while maintaining our *self* and our individuality.

In addition, the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate are not easily defined, but are fuzzy and ever-changing. An astute pastor understands the expectations placed upon him/her by the congregation and respects those expectations, even if they are unreasonable. In her book, The Pastor as Moral Guide, Rebekah Miles explained.

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<sup>17</sup> John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 198.

Pastors and parishioners expect too much of ordained ministers, romanticizing both the role and the person. A more realistic view of pastors and ministry would plan for sin, prompting Christians to set up procedures to protect pastors and parishioners from pastors and parishioners. Pastors also need a more realistic view of their own jobs. Pastors, particularly new ones, often expect ministers to be holy and the church to be pure. The problem with churches is that they are peopled and guided by sinful humans.<sup>18</sup>

Relating personally to members in one's own community is an essential tool used for the development of the rapport between pastor and congregation. As a member of the clergy, one is employed, in fact, *called* to respond to the emotional needs of others, therefore any discussion of *their* emotional needs is appropriate in a care-giving role. However, *the pastor's* emotional issues need not to be shared inappropriately; less they confuse the personal/professional boundaries. The role of the pastor, the pursuit of balance, ministerial families and boundaries will all be discussed in Session Four.

#### **Session Five (Thursday, 9:30-11:30am):**

In Session Five, the group will meet to discuss role models and resources to proceed in our individual journeys. In order to continue with learning, discussion and preparation, each participant must take responsibility for oneself. Crises may arise and challenges may threaten our progress. How are we to respond?

When involved in counseling, a pastor is confronted with various situations in which outside contacts become vital in healing. Margaret Kornfeld, in her book Cultivating Wholeness, described a network of resources to be used by clergy in the intervention of acute crises.<sup>19</sup> She suggests that clergy be aware of the resources in their own community and establish a network comprised of various people and institutions to aid in cases of acute

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<sup>18</sup> Rebekah L. Miles, The Pastor as Moral Guide (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 121.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Kornfeld, Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1998), 232.

crisis. In a similar way, we need an emergency list when we ourselves get into trouble: when faced with temptation, when challenged about why we've chosen the life we have, when confronted with doubts and anger, when battling loneliness. To whom do we turn? The following list of resources is intended to be helpful for those pursuing celibacy, but can also be used for those counseling the celibate or as a starting point to discern resources for the partnered.

***In Case of Emergency, locate the following in your community:***

- Mentor/Elder pastor
- Spiritual Director
- Psychologist/ Counselor

In addition to the resources found in one's own community, we may also find comfort and guidance in the words of others who have faced similar struggles. The following literary and historical resources are friends I've found useful in my own pursuit of celibate understanding.

***Literary Resources***

**Elizabeth Abbott:** Abbott's A History of Celibacy is a thorough examination of celibacy's history from the Greek mythological celibates to celibates in Greek literature; from the celibacy of Early Christians like St. Simeon and the Desert Fathers and Mothers to later Christian celibates like Hildegard von Bingen and Catherine of Siena; from celibacy used in athletics to celibacy used to liberate women, from Sir Isaac Newton to Cher. Abbott also tackles celibacy in Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam.

**Sean Sammon:** Sammon's book, An Undivided Heart: Making Sense of Celibate Chastity, combines reflection questions with discussion of celibacy's place in the matrix of sexuality.

**Sandra M. Schneiders:** Schneiders' Selling All: Commitment, Consecrated Celibacy and Community in Catholic Religious Life presents celibacy as both charism and vocation and explores the vital link between celibacy, voluntary poverty and community.

**A.W. Richard Sipe:** Sipe is a prolific writer on celibacy, especially the Catholic priesthood. His 1996 book Celibacy: A Way of Loving, Living and Serving details the challenges and the blessings of celibate life and gives a practical "how-to" framework for pursuing celibacy. In 2004 he published Living the Celibate Life: A Search for Models and Meaning, which asks further questions about choosing celibacy and addresses the need for role models of celibate life. One prominent feature of Living the Celibate Life is the presentation of celibate role models, including Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Anthony, John Cassian, Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. Sipe's A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy details the sex scandals in the Roman Catholic Church by a method of interviewing approximately 1500 people who had firsthand knowledge of the sexual/celibate adjustment of priests.<sup>20</sup> Sipe readdressed the sex scandals of the Catholic Church in 2003 with Celibacy in Crisis: A Secret World Revisited.

**Lauren F. Winner:** After her memoir Girl Meets God, Winner wrote Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity. A young woman, Winner offers a different voice to the discussion of celibacy, and as she explains the blessing of sexual chastity, she also challenges the church to explain why we should consider the pursuit of chastity. By the use of storytelling and

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<sup>20</sup> Sipe, A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy (New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers, 1990), 8.

scriptural reference, Winner presents a realistic view of chastity for the temporarily, pre-married single.

### ***Historical Role Models***

#### **Melania the Younger**

One fourth-century female celibate of Early Christianity serves as an example of the way celibacy offered women unique power. Melania the Younger “wore her celibacy like armor against danger.”<sup>21</sup> After convincing her husband to join her in a commitment to lifelong celibacy, she convinced him to live separately, thereby shifting the power in their marital relationship. She gathered together a community of like-minded women and together they traveled extensively. Melania performed several miracles along the way, including the rescue of a woman who was in the care of a butchering surgeon that attempted to cut a dead fetus from her womb.<sup>22</sup> For Melania and her virgins “celibacy was a liberating lifestyle. It exempted them from womanly tedium and toil and granted them excitement, freedom to travel wherever they wished, the luxury of scholarship and debate and a secure, simple life among women who celebrated each other’s friendship.”<sup>23</sup>

#### **Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen**

Elizabeth Tudor, who would become Queen Elizabeth in 1558, vowed to remain unmarried at the age of eight. “I hate the idea of marriage,” she confided in Lord Sussex, “for reasons that I would not divulge to a twin soul.”<sup>24</sup> Not a childish tantrum, Elizabeth’s virginity renowned and caused both political concern and public scandal. Although she was involved in intimate love affairs throughout her life, they were never consummated, less she

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<sup>21</sup> Abbott, 96.

<sup>22</sup> Abbott, 96.

<sup>23</sup> Abbott, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Abbott, 244.

encourage in her male suitors a marriage proposal. The Council and the House of Commons discussed Elizabeth's marital status at length, even requesting that she be wed. With neither a husband nor an heir, she was vulnerable to assassination or overthrow by "sideline contenders."<sup>25</sup> But Elizabeth never did marry, for what benefits did marriage offer?

She was already a queen, immensely wealthy and secure. She was able to command the admiration, feigned or not, of any man in her realm. Marriage could only compromise her independence, diminish her power and tax her limited patience. It might also threaten the stability of the nation.<sup>26</sup>

By remaining unmarried, Elizabeth placed her duty to England first, thereby pledging her fidelity to England, not a husband.

Celibacy can free us from societal expectations we may find restricting. By opting out of partnership, we declare our independence and have the ability to determine our own destiny. For Melania and her virgins, celibacy provided a life in community, the means and purpose to travel and the freedom of self-determination. Celibacy also recognizes the priority of something beyond ourselves: for Elizabeth, it was the duty to her country; for clergy it may be our duty to the Church. Celibacy allows us to see the whole, without becoming distracted by the parts: the whole of God's family and their needs, not merely myself and my own needs; the whole of God's children, not merely my own children; the whole of God's purposes, not merely the part I may play.

### **Hinduism's Brahmacharya**

Celibacy is neither superior nor inferior to the married state. It is simply another path. The celibate path, according to the Hindu practice of brahmacharya, can lead one – through one's purity, by way of selflessness – to *truth*. Our intention is not selflessness, but

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<sup>25</sup> Abbott, 243.

<sup>26</sup> Abbott, 243.

integration of self, but our goal is similar: to learn the truth about ourselves, our world and our God.

The Hindu principle of brahmacharya is based on the understanding of semen as an essential life-giving force. Through ejaculation, a man “gives away” this life-force, but through celibate self-control one keeps that life-force to himself, for himself, providing him with the vitally and strength necessary to lead. Inherent within the principle is a dualistic understanding of the rational mind exercising control over the passions of the body, but the objective remains noble: to attain a level of purity that will lead to the selflessness necessary for the realization of truth.<sup>27</sup> The process of achieving brahmacharya is four-fold. According to Gandhi, one must first recognize that brahmacharya is necessary. Secondly, he must learn to control the senses, particularly through diet. Thirdly, he must “consort only with clean companions, both human and literary.”<sup>28</sup> And finally, he must pray. Through the practice of brahmacharya, one seeks to achieve the truth. Through the practice of celibacy, one seeks to achieve the wholeness of self so that we may function selflessly in the world, for the sake of God and God’s people.

### **Henri Nouwen**

Henri Nouwen, from the time he was six years old, wanted to be a priest.<sup>29</sup> This early acknowledgment of his call led Nouwen into the priesthood, into academia and into a career as an author. Sipe called him “a man of integrity. He said who he was – a priest – and what he was going to do – be celibate.”<sup>30</sup> To all accounts, he was and did what he intended. However, his journey was not without peril. In 1988, Nouwen wrote,

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<sup>27</sup> Abbott, 220.

<sup>28</sup> Abbott, 220.

<sup>29</sup> Sipe, Living the Celibate Life, 113.

<sup>30</sup> Sipe, Living the Celibate Life, 113.

I am still struggling with the same problems I had on the day of my ordination twenty-nine years ago. Notwithstanding my many prayers, my periods of retreat, and the advice from many friends, counselors, and confessors, very little, if anything, has changed with regard to my search for inner unity and peace. I am still the restless, nervous intense, distracted, and impulse-driven person I was when I set out on this spiritual Journey.<sup>31</sup>

Loneliness is as much a part of celibacy as is abstinence, for in the exclusion of romantic partnership there exists a void in one's life: a hole that remains unfilled. This hole allows the celibate to develop other relationships, to serve in a specialized manner, and to share love with many, not merely with one. Celibacy confronts the reality of "being alone" directly and forces the celibate to deal with it in order to serve God and God's people.

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<sup>31</sup> Henri Nouwen, The Road to Daybreak (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 127, cited in Sipe, Living the Celibate Life, 114.

## CHAPTER 6

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As I consider the future, I imagine a church in which we are all free to express our sexuality in the manner to which God has called us. For clergy, that includes the freedom for us to be in relationship or to be unpartnered; to be partnered with a lover of the same gender or another gender; to be married, to remain single; to cohabit; to be a parent; to express love of God and neighbor through celibacy or not. A church in which we are free to express our sexuality would require clergy to be accountable to moral choices and to commitment and responsibility in relationship. A church in which we are free to express our sexuality would allow clergy to ask questions, to engage in discussion and to inquire about resources available. A church in which we are free to express our sexuality would encourage clergy to develop support systems to maintain sexual health. In order for the United Methodist Church to be *that church*, several changes are required.

First, the seven last words must be deleted from the requirements for clergy and clergy candidates. The mandate for celibacy in singleness must be replaced with a requirement for fidelity in relationship, commitment in partnership and responsibility in singleness. The deletion of the mandate would free the church hierarchy from the responsibility of “policing” the sexual behavior of clergy and place that responsibility on the individual. This sentiment has been echoed in the recent report by the Study of Ministry Commission. In 2004 the members of the General Conference mandated a four-year study “to theologically discuss and clearly define the ordering” of various

expressions of United Methodist ministry.<sup>1</sup> The intended purpose was to examine the role of certified lay ministers, local pastors, deacons and elders in the leadership of the church. The request for the study reflected “continued ambiguity in the denomination’s understanding of lay, licensed, and ordained ministry,” according to the resolution establishing the study.<sup>2</sup> In the report, the Commission determined the mandate, without definition or explanation, limits the role of church hierarchy to that of “gate-keeper.”

The material of Paragraph 304 and footnote 3 continues to interpret the process of candidacy primarily as a gate-keeping function of the church. Certain behaviors, such as “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” and the “practice of homosexuality” are singled out as specific prescriptions or prohibitions without any definitions of terms or references to Christian traditions that support such language. This is poor church law.<sup>3</sup>

According to the report, this model of church law encourages the Judicial Council and some cabinets and boards of ordained ministry to develop definitions using “graphic language inappropriate for church law.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore the Commission concluded that “undefined terms cannot be used to exclude or expel persons from the church’s ordained ministries.”<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the United Methodist Church must establish processes in which clergy are able to seek support, training and preparation for healthy sexual lives, not

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<sup>1</sup>United Methodist Church (U.S.), General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, [Four-Year Ministry Study Commission Begins Task of Clarifying United Methodist Ministry](#), online, available from <http://www.gbhem.org/asp/viewNews.asp?id=255>.

<sup>2</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), GBHEM, [Four-Year Ministry Study](#).

<sup>3</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, United Methodist Church (U.S.), [Minutes of Several Conversations between the Study of Ministry Commission, Chairs of the Orders and Boards of Ordained Ministry of Annual Conferences, various laity and clergy across the connection, and the General Conference of the United Methodist Church](#), online, available from <http://www.gbhem.org/studyofministry/index.html>, 28.

<sup>4</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), GBHEM, [Minutes](#), 28.

<sup>5</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), GBHEM, [Minutes](#), 28.

only to prevent scandal, but to establish a sexually-mature and wholly-integrated clergy. An environment of silence and embarrassment surrounding clergy sexuality fosters inappropriate sexual expression and unhealthy relationships. In an environment of support and confidentiality, clergy must be allowed to speak freely about their fears, struggles and joys of sexuality and sexual expression. In addition, we – as a church – must provide clergy with resources to prepare for and live out a vow of celibacy, if they so choose one. It is unreasonable for us to expect those who do choose celibacy to maintain healthy sexual lives “on their own.”

Finally, celibate pastors must have the opportunity to gather together in community. Isolation and loneliness are the enemies of a healthy sexuality for clergy. Pastors who are facing the similar challenges and joys may be able to draw support and encouragement from each other, whether in regional groups or in ecumenical celibate communities. Furthermore, a vow of celibacy requires that one forsake an intimate relationship with a partner, but should not require one to forsake *all* relationships. Love expressed and developed in community can foster a “home base” from which one can work and give and minister, and then return to the loving family of the community.

A discussion of clerical celibacy is challenging both for the individual clergy and for the Church. The Church would rather we be quiet and never mention celibacy, sex, sexuality or sexual orientation ever again. But silence does not facilitate growth: only discussion, preparation and support in an environment of openness can foster healing in our system. Only with a loving acceptance of single clergy, regardless of orientation, can we move beyond legislation toward criteria based on mutuality, love

and respect. Only with the removal of the mandate can we express our trust in single clergy and their self-determination. Only with education about both celibacy and partnership can we begin to move forward in our understanding of the miraculous gift of sexuality, given by God.

This project is a beginning. May it evoke in you and in others a response to continue the conversation beyond today.

## APPENDIX:

### SURVEY FOR CAL-PAC ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2006

*Thank you for taking the time to share your opinions. Please feel free to write additional comments on the back. Be assured that names and other identification will not be used in the project, so feel free to share openly.*

<b>Relationship Status:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> single <input type="checkbox"/> married <input type="checkbox"/> widowed <input type="checkbox"/> divorced <input type="checkbox"/> separated <input type="checkbox"/> partnered	<b>I am:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Ordained <input type="checkbox"/> Probationary <input type="checkbox"/> Candidate <input type="checkbox"/> Seminary Student <input type="checkbox"/> College Student <input type="checkbox"/> Retired <input type="checkbox"/> Local Pastor	<b>Year of birth:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Pre-1925 <input type="checkbox"/> 1925-1942 <input type="checkbox"/> 1943-1960 <input type="checkbox"/> 1961-1981 <input type="checkbox"/> 1982+	<b>Self Identification:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Homosexual <input type="checkbox"/> Heterosexual <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
		<b>Gender:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male	

Which of the following is included in your understanding of celibacy? (Check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> no orgasm <input type="checkbox"/> no dating <input type="checkbox"/> no intercourse <input type="checkbox"/> no sexual encounter with another person <input type="checkbox"/> no pregnancy <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> no masturbation <input type="checkbox"/> no non-genital intimate friendships <input type="checkbox"/> no kissing <input type="checkbox"/> no children by means of adoption <input type="checkbox"/> no children by means of artificial insemination	<input type="checkbox"/> no pornography <input type="checkbox"/> no sex toys
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*Comments:*

Does your understanding of celibacy correspond with the understanding of the UMC?

*Comments:*

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> I don't know

What has been your experience with "celibacy in singleness" during candidacy or ministry?

<input type="checkbox"/> None: it was not required for me. <input type="checkbox"/> Limited. <input type="checkbox"/> It is required of me, but I choose not to practice celibacy. <input type="checkbox"/> Plenty. I am currently a practicing celibate and am happy about it. <input type="checkbox"/> Plenty. I am currently a practicing celibate and would like not to be. <input type="checkbox"/> Plenty. I was a celibate and am now married. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____
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*Comments:*

During Candidacy and Ministry, have you participated in any of the following:

**Preparation for celibacy:** Workshops, Literature, Classes, Counseling

*If yes, describe:*

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> No

**Discussion about celibacy:** with mentors, advisors, Board of Ordained Ministry, peers, friends

*If yes, describe:*

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
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**Support regarding celibacy:** counseling, spiritual direction, DS/Bishop

*If yes, describe:*

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> No

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